

Communities of Practice in an Arabic Culture: Wenger's Model and the United Arab Emirates Implications for Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of globalization and the proliferation of online learning, the creation of culturally sensitive online learning environments takes on increasing importance. Online education provides new opportunities for learners from different cultural backgrounds to come together, learn, expand their knowledge, share ideas, and develop passion for their vocation. Emerging models of how communities work, such as Communities of Practice (CoPs) are being increasingly used to understand how online communities might grow and develop.

Schwen & Hara (2003) outline 4 stages of design necessary to ensure that CoPs are properly designed for an online environment: phase 1) Possible Design Interventions, phase 2) Analysis, phase 3) Design and, phase 4) Evaluation and Revision. Phase 1 and phase 2 of this design model are considered in this study, in light of Etienne Wenger's (2002) elements of a Community of Practice: domain, community and practice. These elements are considered in order to gauge the degree to which they can be applied in an Arab educational culture.

The investigation focuses on College-level education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the government-supported Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) system. By analyzing faculty perceptions related to the students' propensity to adopt Community of Practice elements into their educational culture, we can provide guidance for the design of online learning that supports a cross-cultural Community of Practice, specifically as it relates to phase 1 and phase 2 of Schwen and Hara's design structure.

Keywords: Globalization, proliferation, online learning, community of practice.

PURPOSE

Schwen and Hara (2003), were concerned about the misapplication of the constructs of Communities of Practice as online learning communities, and provided guidance in facing the challenges of designing online CoPs that would be truly inclusive. They outlined four phases of design that would assist in this pursuit: Phase 1) Possible Design Interventions, Phase 2) Analysis, Phase 3) Design and, Phase 4) Evaluation and Revision.

This study is concerned with phase 1 and phase 2 of Schwen's design model. Phase 1 includes such considerations as "to understand the social fabric of the community in which a design is to be considered", and "to recognize those social structures that currently serve the population and engage the population in determining its social learning needs and possible intentions in a new or expanded community functions" (Schwen & Hara, p. 265). Phase 2 of the design process has two central themes: 1) What are the social patterns of learning and identity formation in this population, and 2) what are the untapped possibilities for achieving the goals of the population?

Of particular interest to this design, and the focus of this study, is Wenger's Community of Practice perspective, which has been taken up in a variety of educational contexts, including pre-service education (Stein, Silver and Smith, 1998), adult learning and workplace settings (Wenger, 2002) and school settings (Barb and Duffy, 2000). The basic elements of domain,

community and practice, as proposed by Wenger (2002) will be considered in order to gauge their applicability in an Arab educational culture.

The purpose of this study therefore is to gain the understanding that Schwen proposes in phase 1 and phase 2, the information gathering and analysis phases of his design model, by gauging to what extent the elements of Wenger's model of a Community of Practice can be applied to an Arabic educational culture. In doing so, guidance can be provided in the design of online CoPs that draw a multicultural membership.

OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

To understand in what ways the central elements of Wenger's model of Communities of Practice are consistent with, and different from, the way educational practices concerning community are constructed in Arabic culture, in order to provide guidance for the design of culturally-sensitive distributed Communities of Practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was selected because it lends itself to discovery based on humanistic values and context (Mertens, pp. 164-165). The research itself is guided by theory, with Wenger's model of a Community of Practice providing the theoretical background for this research.

Participants in the Study

Twelve faculty members from the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in the United Arab Emirates were selected based on the following criteria in order to ensure representation from across the United Arab Emirates:

- both men's and women's Colleges were equally represented;
- colleges from the three largest Emirates; Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah were represented;
- both male and female faculty who instruct male Arab National students were represented; and
- both male and female faculty who instruct female Arab National students were represented. A breakdown of participating faculty and their association can be found in the Appendix A.

Faculty members were provided with information about the Wenger Model of a 'Community of Practice' prior to participating in the study.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The information in this study is best understood with a brief insight into Arabic history, education and culture in the United Arab Emirates.

Humble Beginnings

Prior to the discovery of oil in 1966 (Dubai: A Pictorial Tour, 1996), the harsh environment of what is now known as the United Arab Emirates supported one of the lowest population densities in the world. Extended families had been moulded by time into tribal groups for their mutual protection and well-being, governed by the traditions and cultural heritage of the desert Arabs. Islam was practiced in its purest sense, and was paramount; unquestioned (Codrai, 1992).

History of Education in The United Arab Emirates

Prior to 1966, there was very little development in the Arabian Peninsula, and certainly no formal educational system. Most education was religious and hinged strongly on storytelling,

with oration being the predominant form of teaching. Some formal schooling occurred at the elementary level.

The discovery of oil provided the necessary finances to improve the education system. This was a high priority for His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the UAE President, who declared: "Youth is the real wealth of the nation." His aim was to use the oil revenue to develop academically and technically qualified citizens - men and women - able to serve their country in its future progress.

When the UAE was established in 1971, education was still largely confined to urban areas, however since the federation of the UAE, an educated society has been viewed as essential in achieving the targets of social and economic development. In support of this, Article 17 of the UAE Constitution, which states: "education is an essential element in achieving the progress of society. It is mandatory in the elementary stage and free for all stages" (Mograby, p. 286).

Higher Colleges of Technology

In pursuit of these objectives, a 10-college network of Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) was established in 1988. This network provides open access, no cost college education to UAE Nationals. The colleges are open to both male and female students, with each studying at separate colleges. This is a free education system for men and women, and is consistent with the 20-year strategy established by The Ministry of Education and Youth to further develop the education system of the UAE

(http://www.sheikhmohammed.co.ae/english/history/history_edu.asp).

SOME TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this report, several phrases and words from the Arab language and culture were used by the faculty. Many of the students and faculty use these words, as they represent special meaning in Arab language and culture. An understanding of their meaning helps to better interpret the data in this study. The following words and associated meaning are presented for clarification and understanding.

Inshallah. This is loosely translated as "God-willing", or "If it be the will of God", or "It is in God's hands". The faculty often used this word during these interviews as an expression to signify "The students don't believe that they have control over the outcome, because God does".

Wasta. The faculty used this term throughout the interviews to mean "Connections and/or family name, that could bear significant influence".

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In its simplest terms, a Communities of Practice is 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. (Lave & Wenger, 2002)

These social structures designed to encourage learning are not new. Early examples date back when we lived in caves and gathered around the fire to discuss strategies for cornering prey, the shape of arrowheads, or which plants were edible. Lave and Wenger formalized this activity with a model of Communities of Practice that could be readily applied to educational settings. This provided us with the leap from a conceptual understanding of learning as a social process, to a model that could provide ways to think about how communities function and elements to look for in understanding when communities do and do not function in particular ways.

Wenger's model consists of three structural elements, and regardless of the form that a Community of Practice takes, "they all share [this] basic structure" (p. 27). A CoP is a unique combination of these three structural elements: a domain of knowledge, a community of people and shared practice. We will now take some time to better understand each of these three structural elements.

Domain

Domain can be described as a shared understanding of what is important to individuals, while at the same time, being collectively relevant. It is what creates a sense of common ground among people. "The most successful communities of practice thrive where the goals and needs of an organization [or of the collective community] intersect with the passions and aspirations of participants" (p. 32).

The domain of knowledge is what creates the common ground among community members. When defined properly, the domain of a community affirms its purposes and value to its members and stakeholders. Community members who are in tune with the domain understand what matters most to the community, and therefore will contribute relevant information.

Without a commitment to a domain, a community is just a group of friends. A shared domain creates a sense of accountability to a body of knowledge and therefore to the development of a practice.

The concept of domain within a community of practice in education carries with it two distinct assumptions: The first being that community members share some common ground, that would encourage them to come together, while the second being that a common educational ground can be established.

Community

Community refers to "a group of people who interact, learn from each other, build relationships, and in the process, develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment" (p. 34). Because Communities of Practice depend on internal leadership, and healthy communities do not depend entirely on the leadership of one person, it is important to establish a sense of shared leadership. Not only is a sense of shared leadership an important facet of community, it is also important that a community represent a "pool of goodwill" (p. 37) of sorts, where people contribute to the community, while trusting that at some time, in some form, they too will benefit. It is this concept of mutual value over time that helps define a Community of Practice.

Wenger notes, "The community creates the social fabric of learning. A strong community fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. It encourages a willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions and listen carefully ... Community is an important element because learning is a matter of belonging as well as an intellectual process, involving the heart as well as the head" (p. 28-29).

The concept of a community sometimes leads one to think about a homogeneous group of people, operating in harmony. However, long term interactions, based on mutual respect and trust, also "encourages differentiation among members". (p. 35). In differentiating themselves, members of the community also take on different roles. In other words, each member of the community "develops a unique individual identity in relation to the community [whereby] their interactions over time are the source of both commonality and diversity" (p. 35).

In Wenger's vision of the community element, several characteristics are important; including a sense of shared leadership, a sense of individuality and the acceptance that learning is both a social and an intellectual process.

Practice

Practice represents a "set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain" (p. 38). It establishes a baseline for common knowledge that can be assumed on the part of full community members. Practice explores both the existing body of knowledge, as well as the latest advances and future trends. "Whereas the domain denotes the topic the community focuses on, the practice is the specific knowledge the community develops, shares and

maintains ... This body of shared knowledge and resources enables the community to proceed efficiently in dealing with the domain" (p. 29).

For a Community of Practice to be an effective knowledge building structure, the practice of the community must not only explore traditional bodies of knowledge, it must also explore the latest advances in the field.

The practice is like a mini-culture that operates within the community and includes the concrete tools of the community such as books, articles and websites that members share. It also includes the less tangible principles, rules and frameworks such as a way of behaving, a thinking style and perhaps an ethical stance.

The assumption of the practice is that community members come together to share and explore current and evolving knowledge, by sharing a set of tools, and operating consistently within a shared framework. For a community of practice to be effective, members must be comfortable with this concept of a shared practice.

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

Recalling that Wenger's (2002) model of a Community of Practice encompasses the elements of domain, community and practice, information from faculty interviews relating to each element will now be presented. Only the interview questions along with the highlights of the results are presented in this paper. Complete data tables can be found in Appendix C.

In all cases, the information represents faculty perception of the Arabic educational culture as observed from an academic perspective. The data represents information gleaned from a total of 7064 individual student-teacher contacts over a period of 12 years.

All table references in this section will refer to tables found in *Appendix C: Complete Data*.

Domain

Recall that Domain can be described as a shared understanding of what is important to individuals, while at the same time, being collectively relevant. It is what creates a sense of common ground among people. Given this, several questions were developed that would guide the participating faculty members through a discussion as to whether or not there exists a natural propensity to support a domain of knowledge in the Arab post-secondary education system in the UAE.

Domain Question 1

Are there social, cultural or historical boundaries that help define a common ground among the students?

- All (12 of 12) participants identified the social (or family) nature of the Arab students, and related this tendency to the cultural norms that have developed as a result of their evolution from a clan-based society. This social/family and cultural identification was perceived to be, by far, the strongest source of commonality among the Arab students.
- In addition to this, religion and nationality also represented a strong measure of commonality.
- Only 3 of 12 faculty made mention of their students identifying themselves according to their academic domain that they were currently pursuing, even when directly prompted to consider this factor.

Domain Question 2

Does this [commonality] manifest itself in the classroom? If so, how?

- Faculty overwhelmingly supported the notion that the group tendency that prevails in society manifests itself strongly in an academic setting.

- The most common explanations for how this commonality is manifested in the classroom focus on the notion that the Arabic society is a communal organization whereby helping one another to succeed, and thereby succeeding as a group is paramount to success of the society.
- This manifests itself in the classroom through a shared desire for everyone succeed, which leads to sharing of work, an affinity for group work, and avoidance of individuality.

Domain Question 3

What inspires your students to participate in the classroom?

- With no guidance as to the possible responses, nine responses indicated that some leadership figure, whether the teacher or a student leader, were instrumental in encouraging participation.
- Three (out of 12) responses can reasonably be attributed to a response supporting the domain itself as reason for participation.
- Other responses included the influence of outside pressures such as family or grades as well as an acknowledgement that strong participation would eventually equate to a stronger financial position.

Domain Question 4

What brings your students together to learn, and what keeps them together?

- The driving forces are mostly external to the student as opposed to an intrinsic understanding of the importance of education, or the desire to pursue a domain of study.
- Of interest in this case, is that faculty at women's colleges noted that the female students come together for reasons related to ambition or advancement. This was generally discussed in relation to their status as women or females in society, and a will to better their standing.

Domain Question 5

Do you think that the reasons your students come together will remain in place after graduation?

- Responses included such comments as, "Friendships lead to professional interests that will be maintained past graduation" and "Society is changing to encourage a continued emphasis on connecting the workplace to the education system."
- Students could participate in a 'typical domain of knowledge upon graduation, but not likely [as they are] coming into the program'.
- Forces drawing students together will continue to be in place after graduation "because the Gulf notion of power and Wasta involves a complex interlinking of relationships, both cultural and societal that will continue to exist after graduation."

Domain Question 6

Do your students see what education can add to their personal goals?

- The female responses align more closely with the notion that education helps to fulfill personal goals insofar as social and status needs are concerned.
- Male students perceive the connection between personal and academic goals more so than their female counterparts.

Community

Recall that the community creates the social fabric of learning, and that a strong community fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. It encourages a willingness to share ideas. Community is an important element because learning is a matter of belonging as well as an intellectual process, involving the heart as well as the head. The interview questions for this section were designed to investigate to what extent the concept of community is applicable in the Arab educational culture, and society in general.

Community Question 1

In general terms, what do you think matters most to your students?

- Consistently, faculty perceived both male and female students to value religion, belonging and family
- These same factors appeared in the section on 'Domain' when the faculty was asked to consider what factors helped define a sense of commonality among these students.

Community Question 2

Do your students rely on one another and share resources and expertise, thereby learning from one another?

- The willingness to share one's work and ideas is very much part of the culture of these students. It is interesting to note that sharing of work is cultural, and not considered cheating.
- As faculty noted, "There is a feeling of obligation [to help] or interdependency [in the classroom] ... Students don't differentiate between helping and cheating", or "They are very kind to the weaker students. It's allowing all students not to live with the burden of individuality", and finally "Sharing is not seen as wrong. You are helping your brothers to achieve their goals".
- Sharing of resources may, or may not, have learning as an objective, or actually result in learning.

Community Question 3

To what extent are issues of mutual respect and trust important? Does this manifest itself in the classroom?

- Issues relating to classroom and the larger society are intertwined. Strong social and cultural norms once again manifest themselves in an education setting.
- Mutual respect and trust are very important, whether this be between students, or between the instructor and the students. 'Saving face', or maintaining one's good name, leads to respect and plays an important cultural role in society.

Community Question 4

Do students see learning as a social or intellectual experience; or perhaps a bit of both?

- Most faculties identified a lack of intellectual ambition upon entering college, however, many also noted that intellectual ambition increased with continued exposure to an education system that strives to connect the local community to the classroom whenever possible.
- Students tend to come together for social reasons, and develop an appreciation for academic or intellectual pursuits as time goes on. The natural tendency is to select a course of study based on social factors.
- Intellectual experiences do play a larger part as the students mature as students. This was somewhat truer for male students, than for female students who continued to focus more on the social aspects of school.

Community Question 5

How would you explain leadership in the community? Does this manifest itself in the classroom?

- Those factors that would lead to influence and leadership in the broader community are the same factors that promote students to a leadership role within the classroom.
- There is a strong feeling that 'Leadership Roles are Difficult to Change', and that 'The Concept of Shared Leadership is not Common'. Leadership roles tend to be taken up by those natural leaders in society. In this way, the classroom is a microcosm of the broader community insofar as leadership is concerned.
- A shared leadership model is not readily endorsed or practiced.

Practice

Practice explores both the existing body of knowledge, as well as the latest advances and future trends. The practice is the specific body of knowledge that the community develops, shares and maintains that "enables the community to proceed efficiently in dealing with its domain" (Wenger, 2002, p. 29). For a community of practice to be an effective knowledge building structure, the practice of the community must not only explore existing bodies of knowledge, it must also explore the latest advances in the field.

Practice Question 1

What specific knowledge do students practice, share and maintain?

- The students focus much of their attention on the curriculum specific information.
- It is also worth noting that, aside from sharing and maintaining practice-related information, there exist a strong desire to advance one's knowledge in religious and social issues.

Practice Question 2

Will the students continue to develop this knowledge after graduation?

- The tendency was for female students to be seen as more likely to follow these pursuits, as of the 14 positive responses noted, 9 were representative of female students, and 5 were representative of male students.
- Faculty reporting the tendency for students to pursue this knowledge after graduation was specifically referring to those students, male or female, who elected to enter the workforce after graduation.

Practice Question 3

Do students see the importance of exploring new advances in their field?

- There were three distinct streams of responses to this question; a) those that indicated that students did, at least to some extent see the importance of pursuing academic

pursuits (7 responses), b) those that indicate no desire for these pursuits (5 responses), and, c) those that indicate a desire for this exploration for unrelated reasons, be they personal or social (12 responses).

- When combining the positive responses, 19 out of a possible 24 responses indicating a willingness to pursue new advances in their field, for one reason or another.

Practice Question 4

Do students welcome outside experts and learn from them?

- As with the previous question, the responses can be broken down into distinct categories; a) responses indicating that the students do not see the relevance to this learning opportunity (8 responses) and, b) responses indicating that indicate students' receptiveness to these opportunities for reasons related to their practice (10 responses).
- Of the 10 responses indicating a desire to learn from experts for practice-related reasons, 8 of these responses can be attributed to male students, while only two of the responses can be attributed to female students.

Final Question

A final question was asked of the participating faculty members. This question was designed to provide an overall wrap up, and some indication as to the impetus for students to come together, to learn and to pursue their practice in a method that is consistent with a western-model Community of Practice.

This question was as follows: Wenger indicates,

"Domain, community and practice are not merely useful terms for defining communities of practice. They represent different aspects of participation that motivate people to join a community. In fact, to some extent, they characterize basic types of members in a community of practice. Some participate because they care about the domain and want to see it developed. Others are drawn by the value of having a community; they are looking mainly to interact with peers who share something important ... Other members simply want to learn about the practice: what standards have been established, what tools work well, what lessons can be learned by master practitioners" (Wenger 2002, p. 44).

Given this, which element of a Community of Practice do you feel would most strongly motivates your students to become members in a CoP?

The response to this last question was unanimous with 12 of 12 faculty members all emphatically stating that the Community elements is, or would be, most important in motivating students to participate in a Community of Practice.

ANALYSIS OF INFORMATION

Throughout the interviews, several common themes that shed light on Arab students' perceived predisposition to embracing the elements of a Community of Practice emerged. Each of these themes will be explored in light of the interview results and prevalent research in the area. Recall that all results and analysis refer to faculty perceptions of students' predispositions, and

Group versus Individual Focus – Assessment

Within the Arabic college education system in the UAE, students tend to measure success according to how well cohorts of students (rather than individual students) succeed in progressing through the system (see Table 8).

Individual measurements of success do not naturally play an important role in the lives of these students. The concept of measuring and assessing students as individuals is contrary to cultural and historic norms (see Tables: 2 and 8).

The western tradition of assigning a numeric value to intelligence, and to differentiate students based on this value has little inherent meaning to these students. These students view the education process, much as any other process in their society, as something to be embraced as a group activity for the advancement of all involved. The process of assigning a value to an individual's intelligence is not only contrary to the Arabic culture, but it is also a relatively recent occurrence in the history of education.

"the first instance of grading students' papers occurred at Cambridge University in 1792 at the suggestion of a tutor named William Farish. No one knows much about William Farish; not more than a handful have ever heard of him. And yet his idea that a quantitative value should be assigned to human thoughts was a major step toward constructing a mathematical concept of reality. If a number can be given to the quality of a thought, then a number can be given to the qualities of mercy, love, hate, beauty, creativity, intelligence, even sanity itself. When Galileo said that the language of nature is written in mathematics, he did not mean to include human feeling or accomplishment or insight. But most of us are now inclined to make these inclusions." (Postman, p.13)

Jonassen (1995) believes that we have moved beyond the behaviourist approach that rewards with high grades, and punishes with low grades; that we now design our instruction with more of a constructivist approach, with the student at the center of the experience. He notes, "The revolution in learning theory and instructional design has transcended the behaviorism-cognitivism dialectic and entered a new era of theorizing", however, if we continue to measure success based on a technique that very much aligns with the behaviourism-cognitivism approach, it is questionable that we have succeeded in moving beyond a behaviourist approach towards more of a social constructivist penchant.

For social, historical and cultural reasons, the Arab students themselves (as potential CoP members) have adopted a pluralist paradigm to assessment. The students' approach to helping one another succeed is more consistent with Jonassen's thoughts than are the techniques being applied by the academic experts who continue to embrace a behaviourist approach to measuring student success. The participating faculty talked about the issue of cheating, and how the students' desire to help one another through school is considered cheating (see Table 8), however, to the UAE students, this desire to support peers through their educational processes comes naturally and is associated with helpfulness, and fulfilling a social obligation.

If we focus our attention on learning rather than 'assigning a value to intelligence', the students will bring their cultural tendencies to bear on supporting one another to achieve the laudable goal of learning. As several of the HCT instructors noted, authentic exercises needed to be designed that would account for, and exploit this cultural group tendency. A vibrant CoP would understand what the progressive faculty have achieved, and exploit the students' tendency towards group approaches to assessment.

Group versus Individual Focus - Classroom Learning

In a similar way, the UAE students preferred a group approach to learning in the classroom (see Tables 4, 5, 7, 10 and 14). This approach to learning is consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and social constructivist theorists (Cortazzi, 1998), in that learning is necessarily a social process in which community members socially negotiate meaning. That is, learning is conversation, and the thinking and intelligence of a community of learners is distributed throughout the group. Knowledge and intelligence are not the privilege of an individual, but rather is shared by the community of practice (Jonassen, 1995).

Community represents a critical element in an effective CoP, and the UAE students certainly subscribe to this notion. Though this can be extremely beneficial in a Community of Practice, this study also indicates that this socialization may actually be a stronger force than the desire to advance the practice and knowledge (see Table 14). Understanding that learning is a social process in the minds of these students, and that attention should be given to leveraging this predisposition to advance learning can be a powerful factor in advancing the notion of a culturally inclusive CoP.

Cultural Filters

Understanding the social and cultural heritage of a people is important in understanding the filters through which learning and communicating should be analyzed. As an example of this phenomenon, consider the case presented by Bohannan (1981) in *Shakespeare in the Bush*. A tried and true example of western English teaching, the story of Hamlet, was recounted to a group of tribespeople in West Africa. Despite Bohannan's best efforts to share this story with the tribespeople, they could not readily understand the context from which the story draws much of its reason. From a leadership perspective, the concept of a Chief, versus a former Chief could not readily be related to their culture, as the leadership succession in West Africa was very much different than that told in Shakespearian times. Similarly, the concept of a Chief (or country leader) having only one wife was not understood by the tribespeople. Bohannan's troubles in recounting the story of Hamlet continued, largely due to his false assumption that the contexts of our western education can readily be transferred to another culture.

Faculty in this study shared several occasions where the UAE students used such filters as they engaged in education. Such tendencies as *Wasta* behaviour, excessive socialization, responding to external expectations, and *Inshallah* attitude towards goals are but a few examples of cultural attitudes and norms that shape how the students would communicate and share information (see tables 2, 4 and 6).

The presence of these filters should not preclude students from various cultural backgrounds from learning from one another, and gaining the wealth that can be obtained through understanding different contexts that individuals can bring to a Community of Practice. This would be consistent with Scardamalia (2000) who discovered that "Different participants [spread over 10 countries] set out their different beliefs, and members of the community approach[ed] information from different vantage points". Wenger's supports the idea that distributed CoPs that intersect various cultures, are a real phenomenon. However he also notes that the members must be diligent and more intentional about connecting people (Wenger, 2002, p. 122). Similar to Bohannan's experience in Africa, Wenger advances the idea that people from different cultural backgrounds can have very different ways of relating to one another, and that this can cause communication problems within the community.

Broader Communities of Practice

A fundamental issue for Communities of Practice in an educational setting is simply that they are not part of the broader social and practical community (Brown and Duguid, 2000, Hung & Tan, 2004, and Barab & Duffy, 2000). Without this wider reach, the tenets of an effective CoP will not be realized. Membership cannot be fluid when it is limited to the classroom structure. In order to encourage the active participation of members, and the ready promotion of members from newcomers to full membership in a CoP, there must be reason for full members to continue to share ideas and learn from other members. A CoP that encompasses the broader community provides such a venue.

A true Community of Practice has characteristics that are more consistent with a learning community than with a classroom structure. The table below drawn from *Education in the Arab World: Challenges for the Next Millennium* (p. 147) explains these differences quite succinctly.

Differences between the Organization of a Classroom and a Learning Community

Class Structure	Learning Community
Homogeneous grouping	Heterogeneous groupings
Class discipline	Community organization
Competition	Collaboration
Knowledge delivery	Knowledge construction
Teacher centered	Student centered

Independent, individual work
Expertise flows from one to many

Interdependent, teamwork
Expertise flows in many directions

Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) echo this sentiment, and add, "The activities of a domain are framed by its culture. Their meaning and purpose are socially constructed through negotiations among present and past members" (p. 5). Without community involvement, it is unlikely that membership can be fluid, involving members at all stages, and reflecting the culture of the broader community.

At present, some students view education as a 'moment in time' experience; a seemingly unconnected education system (see Table 5) that is consistent with a class structure outlined in the table above. These views, however, are evolving in the minds of the students to ones where a true partnership can be established with the local community. Several faculties noted that from the first year of College to the third year, students have already made the association between education and the broader community. It is at that point, that community members can continue to participate in a meaningful way after graduation. Sustainability of a CoP through this type of member progression is crucial to its success. Faculty and administrators in the Higher Colleges of Technology are acutely aware of this, and strive for the involvement of community experts in education. Faculty making use of expert guest presenters and the college student work placement component are instrumental in the success of many of the HCT programs. In the majority of instances, the faculty reported that conditions consistent to a 'community' (see Table 16) were preferable to the students, than were conditions consistent with a 'class structure'.

Leadership

Communities of Practice have as a cornerstone, a system of shared leadership, whereby it is "distributed, and is a characteristic of the whole community" (Wenger, 2002, p. 36). Similarly, Foster (1986) identifies leadership within a community context as one that "is not a function of position but rather represents a conjunction of ideas where leadership is shared and transferred between leaders and followers, each only a temporary designation" (p. 49).

The CoP concept of shared leadership is one that is not readily understood or accepted by the UAE students (see Table 11), despite the fact that the HCT system strives to instruct concepts of group dynamics, shared leadership, situational leadership, and other western philosophies of leadership. (HCT Learning Model, p. 13)

Instructing and adhering to these western philosophies of leadership poses a significant hurdle to the Arab students whose cultural predisposition is one that relies on natural leadership, a benevolent dictatorship, and leadership through *Wasta*. Faculty readily acknowledge that in spite of their best efforts, through group activities or role plays that allow all students to experience various leadership roles, the students invariably revert or defer to the natural leader within the group, regardless of the position that he/she may be assuming for the purpose of the lesson. This complicated leadership structure, based on cultural and historical factors, presents a challenge to the concept of shared leadership that Wenger proposes as necessary to advancing a Community of Practice.

CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ONLINE DESIGN

Schwen and Hara (2003), were concerned about the misapplication of the constructs of online communities, and provided guidance for us when facing the challenges of designing online CoPs that would be inclusive.

This section of the report synthesizes the information gleaned from the faculty interviews and presents specific design characteristics that can be applied to the Arab educational culture, using phase 1 and phase 2 of Schwen and Hara's design process.

Design for Diversity and Multiculturalism

It is not the purpose of this paper to debate the various thoughts and schools of diversity and multiculturalism, however it should be pointed out that popular current approaches, such as the critical approaches that maintain inclusive education can only be achieved when people recognize, understand and change the structures that constrain and exclude individuals and groups from privileges that others enjoy (Ryan, p. 41). Pluralist views on multiculturalism advocate that what needs to be honoured is the 'minority groups' cultures. For them, multiculturalism is apolitical, and only political by virtue of the fact that it is a means of social cohesion and harmony (Ryan, p. 28). Both of these popular views highlight the importance of understanding and respecting different cultures in the education process, and strive for truly inclusive education.

In designing successful online Communities of Practice that address the needs of all cultures, differences should be understood, accounted for, and honoured as part of the educational process, and communities should not be developed that favour the privileged groups or the majority.

Engage Existing Social Structures

The point of phase 1 of the Schwen's design process is to "recognize those social structures that currently serve the population and engage the population in determining its social learning needs and possible intentions in new or expanded community functions" (Schwen, p. 265).

In light of the discoveries that were made relative to an Arab educational culture in the United Arab Emirates and the social tendencies that would affect the design of a CoP-consistent learning environment, several existing social structures should be recognized and incorporated into an online CoP design. These would include; a need for socialization, an adversity to individuality, a predisposition towards group success, a cultural heritage of helping one another, and an evolving definition of leadership.

Design for a Broader Definition of Community of Practice

A viable educational Community of Practice, as we have seen, necessarily involves students, teachers, community mentors, and others in an associated field. Because its primary "output" – Knowledge – is intangible, the community of practice might sound like another soft management fad. Communities of Practice have actually improved organizational performance in companies as diverse as an international bank, a major car manufacturer, and a US government agency (Wenger, HBR, 2000).

With the success of CoPs in society as a whole, and the willingness of faculty and students to invite the community into the education process, it is logical that a design should strongly link community activity to learning. With the family holding a strong cultural position in the UAE, and the elder family members already very much involved in the local community, linking education to the local community would leverage the cultural importance of family to strengthen the educational experience.

Implications for design would stress the connection between broader community involvement and the learning process. Students within this culture are now receptive to information and involvement from the social and business community; however, the link between educational objectives and community involvement is not always evident. An online CoP design should provide opportunities for, and reinforce this link.

Design for a Pluralist Approach

The information from this study consistently references the students' need for social and group behaviour, both as a social enterprise, as well as in academic pursuits. More so than a desire for

social or communal behaviour in the classroom, there exists a strong dislike for individuality, and its associated measurement approaches. Design of education that exploits the tendency towards pluralism and group approaches to education should be carefully considered, since it leverages behaviour that is socially, culturally and historically relevant to these students. Further, this pluralist approach to learning is consistent with a successful Community of Practice and could be incorporated into the design of a distributed CoP.

FUTURE DIRECTION

Having provided guidance for phase 1 and phase 2 of Schwen and Hara's design considerations for online Communities of Practice, future study would necessarily involve progressing to phase 3 and phase 4. In these phases, the conditions necessary to encourage the development of a Community of Practice would be established, evaluated and revised. A design research methodology could be applied whereby a CoP involving Arab and western students would be introduced and assessed, with a goal of encouraging practices that support participants in understanding and taking into account cultural variations among members.

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Mark Lamontagne has been administering distance education courses and programs for 16 years. As an early adopter, he has seen this approach to education evolve from the early days of paper-based correspondence to email assisted distance education, to audio conferencing and video conferencing, and finally to the convergence of media in web-based education.

As a professor, instructional designer and student of web-based education, Mark is able to view this exciting process from several perspectives. Whether designing courseware or instructing online, he tries to make the learning management system and the process of education as transparent as possible. He believes that the process of working through an online course should not interfere with the

richness of the content itself.

"As a professor, if I'm spending too much time on process and administration at the expense of both interacting with the students and adding value to the content, then I believe that there is something inherently wrong with the design of the course or the learning environment. Creating an online environment that truly promotes learning proves to be particularly challenging in a multicultural setting".

For these reasons, Mark is focusing his research on the creation of culturally inclusive online learning environments.

Mark holds a Masters of Education (in Computer Applications in Education) from the University of Toronto in Canada, where his research focused on culturally inclusive online learning environments, and in particular, Communities of Practice. He is now pursuing a Ph.D. in Business Administration through the University of Pécs in Hungary where he is extending this research to include distributed online learning communities and their impact on organizational effectiveness.

Mark and his wife Susan live in a small house in North Bay, Ontario, Canada, and commute from their cottage in nearby Tilden Lake in the summertime. They travel as much as possible, and enjoy experiencing other cultures. Mark often mixes business with pleasure, having delivered educational workshops to faculty and administrators in Canada, Ecuador, Sri Lanka and the United Arab Emirates.

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APPENDIX A

Participating Faculty and Their Associations

Emirate	Instructor Gender	Student Gender	Semesters Per Year	Sections Per Semester	Average Class Size	Number Of Years	Individual Student Contacts *
Abu Dhabi	F	F	2	3	20	1	120
Abu Dhabi	F	F	2	4	16	12	1536
Dubai	M	M	2	4	15	8	960
Dubai	F	M	2	3	18	4	432
Dubai	F	M	2	4	13	4	416
Dubai	M	M	2	5	15	2	300
Dubai	M	M	2	4	16	4	512
Sharjah	M	F	2	3	20	6	720
Sharjah	F	F	2	5	15	4	600
Sharjah	F	F	2	5	17	4	680
Sharjah	F	F	2	2	18	4	288
Sharjah	M	M	2	5	10	5	500

* Individual Student Contacts is obtained by multiplying the Semesters Per Year x Average Class Size x Number of Years.

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Domain Question 1:	Are there social, cultural or historical boundaries that help define a common ground among the students?
Domain Question 2:	Does this [commonality] manifest itself in the classroom? If so, how?
Domain Question 3:	What inspires your students to participate in the classroom?
Domain Question 4:	What brings your students together to learn, and what keeps them together?
Domain Question 5:	Do you think that the reasons your students come together will remain in place after graduation?
Domain Question 6:	Do your students see what education can add to their personal goals?
Community Question 1:	In general terms, what do you think matters most to your students?
Community Question 2:	Do your students rely on one another and share resources and expertise, thereby learning from one another?
Community Question 3:	To what extent are issues of mutual respect and trust important? Does this manifest itself in the classroom?
Community Question 4:	Do students see learning as a social or intellectual experience; or perhaps a bit of both?
Community Question 5:	How would you explain leadership in the community? Does this manifest itself in the classroom?
Practice Question 1:	What specific knowledge do students practice, share and maintain?
Practice Question 2:	Will the students continue to develop this knowledge after graduation?
Practice Question 3:	Do students see the importance of exploring new advances in their field?
Practice Question 4:	Do students welcome outside experts and learn from them?
Final Question:	Wenger indicates, <i>"Domain, community and practice are not merely useful terms for defining communities of practice. They represent different aspects of participation that motivate people to join a</i>

community. In fact, to some extent, they characterize basic types of members in a community of practice. Some participate because they care about the domain and want to see it developed. Others are drawn by the value of having a community; they are looking mainly to interact with peers who share something important ... Other members simply want to learn about the practice: what standards have been established, what tools work well, what lessons can be learned by master practitioners" (Wenger 2002, p. 44).

Given this, which element of a Community of Practice do you feel would most strongly motivates your students to become members in a CoP?

APPENDIX C Complete Data

In this presentation of the data, the notation of *Male* and *Female* refers to the gender of the students, and not the gender of the instructor. Recall that instructors from 6 Men's and 6 Women's Colleges were interviewed.

Questions pertaining to *Domain*

Table: 1

Are there social, cultural or historical boundaries that help define a common ground among the students?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Yes - Cultural or Social Factors	6	6	12
Yes - Family	6	5	11
Yes - Religion	2	4	6
Yes - Geography or Nationality	3	2	5
Yes - Gender	2	2	4
Yes - Education	2	1	3
Yes - Age	1	1	2

Table: 2

How/Does this [commonality] manifest itself in the classroom? If so, how?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Yes – Avoiding Individuality	2	3	5
Yes – Family or Wasta Behaviour	3	1	4
Yes – Students Help One Another with Work	2	2	4
Yes – Excessive Socialization	3	1	4
Yes – Cultural or Religious Sensitivities	2	1	3
No – It Does Not Manifest Itself or Don't Know	1	0	1
Yes – Education Becomes Secondary	0	1	1

Table: 3

What inspires your students to participate in the classroom?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Respond to the Teacher's Question or Praise	3	2	5
A Better Education Leads to a Stronger Financial Position	3	1	4
A Leader Within the Course Encourages Participation	2	2	4
Personal Interest in the Activities – Real Life Situations	1	2	3
Family or Country Expectation to Succeed	1	1	2
To Achieve Higher Grades	1	1	2

Table: 4
What brings your students together to learn, and what keeps them together?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Outside Expectations or Pressures	4	3	7
For Social Reasons or To See Friends	3	4	7
Most Students Don't Really Know	2	2	4
Ambition or Advancement	0	4	4
Saving Face – Don't Want to Fail	0	1	1
Enjoyable Education	0	1	1

Table: 5
Do you think that the reasons your students come together will remain in place after graduation?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Yes – Primarily for Social or Cultural Reasons	4	3	7
Yes – Friendships Lead to Common Professional Interests	2	2	4
Yes – Student Placements and Professional Associations Help	2	1	3
No – Schooling is a 'Moment in Time', Artificial Grouping	1	2	3
No – Background and Workplace Realities make it Difficult	1	2	3
No – Academic Reasons Don't, Yes –Social Reasons Remain	0	2	2
Yes and No – Society is Changing to Encourage This	1	1	2

Table: 6
Do your students see what education can add to their personal goals?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
No – Education and Learning are not goals onto themselves	2	5	7
Yes – Education Leads to Pay, Jobs, Status, Material Goods	2	3	5
No – Many Goals are Set by Society, and they don't have control over this (Inshallah)	2	2	4
Yes – This has Progressed Through the Years	4	0	4
Yes – Leads to Status and Self-Gratification	1	3	4
Yes – With Social Interaction being the Goal	1	2	3
Yes – Sense of Pride, Ability and Fulfillment	0	2	2

Questions pertaining to Community

Table: 7
In general terms, what do you think matters most to your students?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Religion	5	4	9
Need to Belong to a Group	4	4	8
Family and Family Obligations	4	3	7
Status and Status Symbols	3	2	5
Saving Face and Avoiding Failure	2	1	3
Making a Contribution to Society and the Nation	1	1	2
Work and Work Prospects	0	1	1

Do your students rely on one another and share resources and expertise, thereby learning from one another?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Yes – They Share with One Another	6	6	12
They Share to Help Other Students 'Get Through'	3	5	8

They Share Their Coursework with Each Other			
(Cheating in the West)	2	5	7
Sharing is a Tribal, Cultural Instinct	4	3	7
Sharing Does Not have Learning as a Goal	4	3	7
They Share Because They Enjoy Group work and Group Focus	3	3	6
They Share to Encourage Learning	2	3	5

Table: 9
To what extent are issues of mutual respect and trust important?
Does this manifest itself in the classroom?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Mutual Respect and Trust Among Students is Very Important	6	4	10
Respect is a Social, Cultural and Religious Foundation	3	6	9
The Role of 'Teacher' Commands Respect	5	4	9
The Credibility of Individual Teacher Earns Respect	1	4	5
Respect is 'Allocated' based on Nationality	3	2	5
Respect is not Demanded, but Earned	3	1	4
Saving Face is Important, which Leads to Respect	0	0	2

Table: 10
Do students see learning as a social or intellectual experience;
or perhaps a bit of both?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Primarily a Social Experience	6	6	12
A Social Experience that Evolves to include an Intellectual Experience	3	1	4
A Bit of Both	1	1	2
Primarily Intellectual	0	0	0

Table: 11
How would you explain leadership in the community?
Does this manifest itself in the classroom?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Status, Money and Social Standing Contribute Strongly Both Inside and Outside the Classroom (Wasta)	6	4	10
Leadership Patterns are Difficult to Change in the Classroom, even during Role Playing	4	3	7
The Concept of Shared Leadership is Not Common	3	2	5
Age is a Determinant of Leadership in the Classroom	3	1	4
Natural (Community) Leaders Evolve Naturally in the Classroom	3	1	4
Students who are Charismatic Assume a Leadership Roll in Class	2	2	4
Intelligence and Confidence are Determinants of Leadership in Class	2	1	3

Questions pertaining to *Practice*

Table: 12
What specific knowledge do students practice,
share and maintain?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Curriculum-Specific Knowledge	4	6	10
Whatever is Socially-Important to the Students	2	2	4
Religion	2	2	4
Workplace Skills	1	1	2
Curriculum-Specific Topics that Evolve from Social Dialogue	1	1	2
Knowledge that is Built on Existing Knowledge	0	1	1

Table: 13
Will the students continue to develop this knowledge after graduation?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Yes – The Work Placement Encourages this Transfer	2	4	6
No – Not Really	2	2	4
Yes - Some Students Do Keep in Touch with Each Other after Graduation	2	2	4
Yes – Where Program Development is done in Consultation with the community	1	3	4
No – Students Don't See the Importance of This	1	0	1
Don't Know / No Answer	1	0	1
No – This Would Take Two Generations to Develop	0	1	1

Table: 14
Do students see the importance of exploring new advances in their field?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Yes – For Personal Interests (Cars, Technology)	3	3	6
Yes – For Social Reasons	2	4	6
No – Not Really	3	2	5
Some Do / Some Don't – for Academic Pursuits	3	2	5
Yes – They are Interested in these Academic Pursuits	2	0	2

Table: 15
Do students welcome outside experts and learn from them?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
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Yes – They Enjoy Listening to Experts in their Discipline	5	1	6
No – They Welcome the Social Opportunities, but Not the Learning Opportunities	1	3	4
Yes – They Enjoy the Change / Variety	2	1	3
Yes – They Feel that Someone Else Should Provide them with the Answers, and this should be an Expert	1	1	2
Yes – It's Important for them to have the Latest Knowledge	0	2	2
No – They Don't See the Relevance	1	0	1

Final Question

Wenger indicates,

“Domain, community and practice are not merely useful terms for defining communities of practice. They represent different aspects of participation that motivate people to join a community. In fact, to some extent, they characterize basic types of members in a community of practice. Some participate because they care about the domain and want to see it developed. Others are drawn by the value of having a community; they are looking mainly to interact with peers who share something important ... Other members simply want to learn about the practice: what standards have been established, what tools work well, what lessons can be learned by master practitioners” (Wenger 2002, p. 44).

Given this, which element of a Community of Practice does you feel would most strongly motivate your students to become members in a CoP?

The response in this last question was unanimous with 12 of 12 faculty members all emphatically stating that the Community elements is, or would be, most important in motivating students to participate in a Community of Practice.

