

A Theoretical Synthesis of Knowledge Sharing and Educational Leadership for Sustaining Learning Communities

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Knowledge is one of the crucial and dominant economic resources in order to obtain sustainable advantages in any community. The world is now shifting faster thanks to the advanced development of digital connectivity and increasing access to knowledge. Leaders of a community, society, or country must contemplate what factors concerned in the emergent era of valuable network that fosters learning communities. To some extent, learning communities benefit each individual member and the community as a whole as they generate economic prosperity as well as improve students' academic and social achievement. They even enhance interdisciplinary studies in higher education levels. Hence, it is of essence to have a strong learning community which requires all stakeholders to actively participate in sharing common values, beliefs, and knowledge in order to pass on their wisdom from generation to generation and embracing a strong sense of loyalty and belonging among themselves, so as to achieve together both individual needs and shared missions of the community. With the aim of sustaining a learning community, it necessitates synthesizing the creative mechanism of knowledge sharing with the application of authentic educational leadership that encompasses a process of influencing, sharing knowledge of new concepts, practices, ideas, insights, abilities, and values for personal development and of facilitating ongoing learning, communicating certain values and useful information for people's well-being in a community, enhancing academic progress, and inculcating sound awareness of continuous lifelong education. The purposes of this study through content analysis are to raise the awareness of the eminent power of sharing knowledge that requires a strong sense of educational leadership and to emphasize the significance of sustaining learning communities for the academic achievement of learners in particular and for the intellectual well-being of people in a community in general.

Keywords: knowledge sharing, educational leadership, learning communities, sustainable education

Introduction

Leaders in any community or circle are required to possess certain skills, abilities, and knowledge in mobilizing communities for a better change. Despite having mutual purposes or shared mission, only one person could not at all achieve leading a community to success. Rather strong commitment and devotion in actively sharing their knowledge and wisdom from members involved are determinants to sustainable learning communities. In the effective mechanism of knowledge sharing for a community to confer sustainable capacity, three critical determinants involve what content should be shared, in which context is conducive to learning and what expected roles members in a community should perform for the betterment of a whole community. In order to create a learning community, it necessitates to have shared emotions, values, and beliefs from its

actively engaged members. All stakeholders are required to work in close collaboration with strong partnership in order to achieve a common purpose: sustaining learning communities. Nevertheless, essential resources in terms of human, physical, and financial factors are of the essence to success. In this study, content analysis was used as Krippendorff (2004) described it as one of the most important research techniques in social sciences. The data were created in terms of texts, images, and expressions for a content analyst to interpret and extract underlying meanings. Content analysis is regarded as an efficient method for public opinion research, tracking markets, political learning, and emerging ideas. This paper aimed to derive theoretical synthesized determinants by coalescing theories of knowledge sharing and educational leadership along with the core notions of learning community and sustainability, the findings of which could provide a fresh impetus for leaders in a community to drum up support and commitment from their stake-holding members for the determination of shared visions in creating sustainable learning communities.

Educational Leadership Towards Learning Communities

According to Bennis and Nanus (1985), leadership is a crucial instrument to develop visions that can mobilize communities for a better change. In the 21st century, there have been so many ongoing changes: the increasing intense of global competition, the rises of complexity and unprecedented changes, and the demise of hierarchy and position power, which all were creating new yet far-reaching challenges to all communities worldwide (McFarland, Senn, & Childress, 1994). In order to demonstrate leadership in a modern era, a leader requires such certain characteristics as vision, inspiration, strategic orientation, integrity, and organizational sophistication (Guthrie, 1990). Meanwhile, Bennis (1992) contended that true leaders to begin with should have four competences. The first attribute is management of attention by acquiring commitment with people. Leading a community to learn necessitates obtaining a great sense of commitment from all stakeholders. Management of meaning is the second quality that leaders should possess, which is carried out through the precise and concise communication of shared vision. Assuming a role of communicator leaders inherits certain challenges. Thirdly, trust and constancy are major determinants in reaching successful leadership. Lastly, management of self which requires leaders to know what their skills are and how they deploy them effectively.

In the context of knowledge sharing and sustaining learning community, stronger leadership abilities are highly needed (Razik & Swanson, 2001). Rather than focusing on leadership merely in terms of peripheral aspects (personality, traits, and goal attainment) or content (knowledge-possessed leader), it is more crucial to focus on the process of leadership that involves “an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (Rost, 1991). Razik and Swanson (2001) also proposed that it is crucial to develop leadership capabilities through changes to the way future leaders and followers are to be educated. Thereby, the learning communities are of the essence to facilitate knowledge transferring among people in a community whereas to build up a strong bridge for passing on wisdom from one generation to another.

Referring to the development of learning communities, Schein (1992) also put forward that the leaders should possess the ability to share knowledge and support ongoing learning which are regarded as the most salient values of future leadership. The leaders of the future will be people who can lead and follow, be individualistic and team players, and most importantly, be perpetual learners themselves.

Referring to leadership values mentioned in the previous section, effective leadership is a process which involves ongoing learning, practicing, supporting, sharing knowledge, and communicating shared values

among leaders and followers. According to Owen, Hodgson, and Gazzard (2004), “Ongoing leadership requires freedom to develop in an environment that supports and guides thinking, emotional well-being, creativity, dialog, openness, trust, and responsibility” (p. 284). These values are regarded as the cornerstone of human development, which is also reflected in the missions of education in many countries. That is to develop people in all aspects, such as intellect, knowledge, morality, and integrity.

In synthesis of educational leadership theories, in line with the meaning of education defined by Thai National Education Act of B.E. 2542 (2003), educational leadership signifies a process of influencing, sharing knowledge of new concepts, practices, ideas, insights, abilities, and values for personal development and of facilitating ongoing learning, communicating certain values, and useful information for people’s well-being, enhancing academic progress, and inculcating sound awareness of continuous lifelong education.

Knowledge Sharing Towards Learning Communities

Drucker (1995) stated that knowledge could be one of the most important dominant economic resources for a community to acquire competitive advantages. However, Brown (2000) simply concluded that knowledge brought about powerful intertwining forces: content, context, and community. It is important to realize what to share (content), where to disseminate (context), and who to carry out such processes (community). As Allee (2003) posited that, it is widely accepted that the world is now shifting faster due to advancement of digital connectivity and increasing access to myriads of informative sources. People in a community need to be active participants for their circles evolve sustainably. As Drucker (1995) emphasized that it was important to equip people with extensive knowledge so that a society or a community could move forward with sustainable strengths. Without the effective process of sharing knowledge, learning communities would be unable to grow and develop for the betterment of the future.

However, no matter how valuable knowledge is to be disseminated but without sharing or being explicitly made available fruitfully for people in a community or a society, such knowledge could be of valueless. Additionally, Shin, Holden, and Schmidt (2001) also demonstrated that the value chain of knowledge management requiring distribution, which functioned as a gate keeper whereby knowledge could be flowed out and shared among people throughout a community. It takes every individual to actively engage to a certain extent. Knowledge is not only a simple tool particularly for an individual to advance his/her career but rather a major driving force generally for the sustainable growth of a nation’s economy as a whole. In order to achieve sustainability, leaders of a community, society, or country must be able to capture what variables and players involved in the emergent era of value network that fosters knowledge-sharing communities (Allee, 2003).

Probst, Raub, and Romhardt (2001) stated that knowledge is considered as a commodity, which is only transferred by the exchanges of people in a community. The value of knowledge depends on to what extent it is used and applied in a certain context for benefiting a group of people in a certain community. Knowledge sharing is a means used to educate individuals within a community. As it is believed that the sharing of knowledge turns isolated information or experiences into something valuable and is a critical determinant for a community to confer sustainable capacity (Gupta & Sharma, 2004; Probst et al., 2001).

Referring to a cycle or spiral with five sections of knowledge process by Gupta and Sharma (2004) based on the work of various theorists (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Denning, 1998; Huber, 1991; Kerssens-van Drongelen et al., 1996; Nonaka, 1994), knowledge sharing and dissemination are mechanisms that create linkage between individual to group for transferring knowledge and enable in-flowing and out-flowing of

knowledge evolving within a community.

According to Dixon (2000), there are five main types of knowledge sharing: serial sharing, near sharing, far sharing, strategic sharing, and expert sharing. Firstly, serial sharing occurs when knowledge (both explicit and tacit) is gained in one context and is then disseminated to the use in a different setting. Serial sharing involves regular meetings, monthly brief sessions, and so on. The second form is near knowledge sharing, which takes place where people who share explicit knowledge, generally routine, frequent, and similar when repeated, to others by various kinds of media. Far knowledge sharing, the third form, is the sharing of tacit knowledge among people, from which collaboration is developed. The fourth one is strategic knowledge sharing that concerns both explicit and tacit knowledge, which is used in infrequent and non-routine situations. Strategic sharing normally involves identification of key knowledge and also the collection and interpretation from knowledge specialists are sought, such as the knowledge required for corporate mergers and acquisitions. Finally, expert knowledge sharing occurs when explicit knowledge from experts is gained, because the knowledge that people have is limited.

According to Probst et al. (2001), it is undeniable that human beings are by nature knowledge sharers. They also highlighted that our natural inheritances to share knowledge have been regarded as crucial to a community. Just as innovation is important to early-aged societies, knowledge sharing has been vital in competitions at global and local levels as well as in organizational readiness. Simply concluding, knowledge sharing is a key to the innovation of a community.

Learning Communities Towards Sustainable Education

Learning communities have been defined in several ways and the concept of which is being discussed and practiced widely in educational circles. For a simple definition of a learning community, it refers to a group of people who have shared emotions, values, and beliefs and actively engage themselves in learning together from one another. The process of learning is undertaken through participation in “communities of common purpose” (Kilpatrick, 1999). According to Feldman (2000), educational theories and practices in the 20th century defined that era as the “century of individual” which demanded a learner to be a “lone seeker of knowledge” but the growing theory of social constructivism of Vygotsky (1978) realized the contribution of togetherness: learning from each other. The main characteristics of learning communities compose of synergistic interests and curricular content. According to Lenning and Ebbers (1999), active collaboration and strong partnership in learning communities develop and facilitate people to share knowledge and potentially create new knowledge for the benefits of the community as a whole. In educational setting, educators, teachers, students or even staff as they are regarded as crucial members in learning communities must value learning, work to improve curriculum and instruction, and focus more on the students’ sustainable growth (Peterson, 2002). Even though learning communities could evolve through strong participation and partnership of their members, they require sound leaders who thrive them to achievement. As Taylor (2002) proposed that it is of significance for leaders to foster learning communities by equipping people with human, physical, and financial resources including opportunities, so that trust, a shared culture and vision, could be viably built. Towards the 21st century, learning communities keep on evolving for the interest of the diverse needs of learners and the communities. Kilpatrick (1999) stated that learning communities shall involve stakeholders with shared purposes, collaborate on building up learning environment that is conducive to enhance capabilities of all members to share and create new knowledge. As Delors (1996) recommended, “Four mutually supportive pillars of learning as the

cornerstone of education for the 21st century”, they are regarded as overarching concepts of sustainable learning paradigm: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. According to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) (2008), in order to develop education for sustainable development, there must be emphases on promoting learning processes: critical thinking, problem-solving, developing a holistic vision, systems thinking, and futures-oriented thinking. It is crucial for community leaders to help their members develop these skills; particular “linking-thinking” which could be practically employed in their real-life contexts. Participation, collaboration, and dialogue in educational processes are important determinants of sustainable education.

Self-sustaining Cyclic Triad: Learning-Leading-Living

A theoretical reflection on “cosmological models in which the universe follows infinite and self-sustaining cycles” (Steinhardt & Turok, 2007), sustainability of education is derived from the strong and continuous relationship among three key determinants: learning (content/knowledge sharing), leading (ongoing leadership) and living (learning communities) (see Figure 1). Aristotle once said, “For the things, we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them”. It is inevitable to accept that we need our learners to do and embrace explicit and tacit knowledge through experience. Nowadays, an emphasis on practical learning processes has been laid firmly as UNESCO (2008) urged educators worldwide focusing on critical thinking, problem-solving, developing a holistic vision, systems thinking, and futures-oriented thinking. These skills enable learners to “link” their knowledge and facilitate them to “think” critically through applying their learnt theories in real-life situations. In the effective sharing of “content (education and experience)”, environment plays a major role to facilitate people in a community to acquire sustainable education successfully. Therefore, a “context” that is conducive to successful knowledge sharing requires active participation, collaboration, and dialogue among stakeholders in communities as a whole, particularly their leaders. A strong sense of an ongoing leadership could pave ways “to develop an environment that supports and guides thinking, emotional well-being, creativity, dialog, openness, trust, and responsibility” (Owen et al., 2004). These values, combined with integrity and morality education, contribute greatly to the quality development of learning community members. All in all, a leader needs to be fully aware of what to share, where to share it, and how to make the sharing achieved for thriving this cyclic triad to be dynamically self-sustainable.



Figure 1. Self-sustaining cyclic triad.

Conclusion

All stakeholders including educational institutions, public and private sectors in any communities need to be actively aware that their supports could contribute to the sustainability of their communities more or less. As members, they merely learn to share and develop their knowledge and wisdom actively and that could turn to be a powerful means for a community to evolve sustainably. Opportunities to learn and experience provided by public and private organizations are considered crucial learning factors for young generation to embrace practical knowledge and education, as they could learn from real-life experiences. For leaders, they are to provide a community with a strong and fresh impetus to determine shared visions, to develop an environment supporting creative dialogue, openness and build up strong commitment in creating sustaining education for people in a community.

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