

A Commentary on Etienne Wenger's Keynote Presentation at the 2012 California Association of Professors of Educational Administration (CAPEA) Conference

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This commentary explains and expands upon Wenger's concept of communities of practice. Knowledge construction to improve common practice within a community committed to learning is critical. Vertical and horizontal communication, interactions within and between boundaries of organizations are necessary for creating learning organizations. One such organization is education.

This is a commentary on Etienne Wenger's keynote presentation at the California Association of Professors of Educational Administration (CAPEA) conference held in 2012. The focus of the paper is on Wenger's work regarding communities of practice (Wenger, 1999; Wenger, McDermott, & Synder, 2002). The ideas shared by Wenger offer promise for bringing about greater equity and quality to the field of educational leadership.

Communities of Practice

Wenger (1999) described thirteen characteristics that are common among true communities of practice. Key to communities of practice is a sustained mutual relationship that exhibits shared ways of engaging in harmonious and/or conflictual conversations and interactions. Through these conversations, the flow of information propagates innovation through effective problem solving. The community of practice builds on the strengths and contributions of each member, and shares a common language, purpose, and ways of being.

Social Practice and Theories of Identity

Wenger shared in his presentation a social theory of learning whereby humans seek meaning. In the act of learning, a person simultaneously is learning about self and others. Through this process, one's identity as well as the group's identity is formed and transformed.

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Theories of *social practice* address the production and reproduction of specific ways of engaging with the world. They are concerned with everyday activity and real-life settings, but with an emphasis on social systems and shared resources by which groups organize and coordinate their activities, mutual relationships and interpretations of the world.

Theories of *identity* are concerned with the social formation of the person, the cultural interpretation of the body and the creation of the use of markers of membership such as rights of passage and social categories. They address issues of gender, class, ethnicity, age, and other forms of categorization, association, and differentiation in an attempt to understand the person as formed through complex relationships of mutual constitution between individuals and groups (Wenger, 1999, p. 13).

In contrast to the assumptions about learning in our existing institutions, Wenger (1999) emphasized that informed practice occurs when we begin with our identity such that we address “the formation of identity in practice as the ability to negotiate an experience of meaning” (p. 17). This has meant that engagement in experiences has occurred consciously:

. . . in a complex world in which we must find a livable identity, ignorance is never simply ignorance, and knowing is not just a matter of information. In practice, understanding is always straddling the known and the unknown in a subtle dance of the self. It is a delicate balance (Wenger, 1999, p. 41).

We must develop more complex ways of learning for ourselves as professors of educational administration so we can engage with our students in ways resulting in their attainment of mastery of practice.

Two Types of Knowledge as Dimensions of Learning: Vertical and Horizontal

Wenger spoke about two types of knowledge as Dimensions of Learning: Vertical and Horizontal. He began by discussing the vertical dimension that has long existed in organizations.

An example of the vertical dimension was the thinking and work of Frederick Taylor. Leaders were to engage in science such that the science was reflected in each person’s work. Thus, he stressed the focus was “getting employees to learn how to do the job the right way, in contrast to developing their own approach through experience” (Hodgetts & Greenwood, 1995, p. 218). He emphasized that work done conformed to his scientific thinking on efficiency where management did its duty to solve the “daily problems” of the workers and reward them (Hodgetts & Greenwood, 1995, p. 220). Rather than encouraging people to share about their practice in improvement of it, Taylor stressed, “dividing up the work” into jobs where people usually were compartmentalized and did not interact with others outside their departments (Hodgetts & Greenwood, 1995, p. 222). Taylor believed this resulted in productivity effectiveness. While this command and comply dimension has long held a place in organizations, it is not enough in a world where knowledge construction and improved practice are needed throughout the organization.

While this vertical dimension has tended to define organizations and may continue to have a place in organizational management, communities of practice are not about organizations, necessarily, but about learning. In contrast to the vertical dimension, the horizontal dimension emphasizes social equality because people come together in contexts of

learning beyond the formal roles of an organization. This type of interaction heightens the opportunity for the presence of equity, hopefully through the dialogue that values the diverse thinking and contributions of the members and maintains high regard for the rights of all people. This conversation creates a context for discussing fairness, equality, and commitment to helping those most in need.

Wenger stressed that today's leaders must recognize the importance of the horizontal dimension in leading for equity. One of the most important features of the horizontal dimension of learning is social equality. Both the vertical and horizontal dimensions constitute a context in which the negotiation of meaning occurs.

A story appearing on multiple Internet sites illustrates the heart and outcome of horizontal relationships. Picture a group of children sitting in a circle with their feet touching and in the center of the circle is a bowl of fruit. The story begins when an anthropologist asks the children in the circle to compete to win a bowl of fruit. The anthropologist was dumbfounded when the children held hands, ran to the fruit together as one, encircled the fruit, and then smiled as they shared the fruit with one another. The anthropologist asked why each student did not try to win the basket for oneself. A child asked: "How can one be happy when others are sad?" This little story illustrates horizontal learning as characterized by: trust, mutuality, and collaboration. The circle of children carries with it the symbol of continuity and completeness.

Challenge and Opportunity for Professors of Educational Administration

The challenge and opportunity we, as professors of education administration, face is to see and tap into the potential that communities of practice have for allowing us, and our students, to understand and work with learning, accountability, and the construction of new meanings in a different way. Wenger shared that one or more communities of practice can exist within an organization but neither organizations nor parts of organizations in and of themselves constitute communities of practice.

A community of practice is an entity that emerges as a group grapples with issues they wish to share and resolve together. The advantage of seeing learning in this way is that it offers us an opportunity to reconceptualize learning. For professors of educational administration, it provides a means for broadening administrative leadership preparation and one's own learning and identity development.

Wenger has identified a way for people to come together to engage in learning that is related to practice and that impacts the identity of the learner. The power of communities of practice is that this approach to learning and problem solving provides an alternative to the vertical-only dimension where communication occurs according to policies and directives. Attention to the ways in which organizational structures have operated in the past is revealing institutionalized forms of discrimination (e.g., racism, ableism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc.). In other words, discussion has been traditionally limited in the realm of seeking social equality, equity, and the dignity of the human person.

The Role of Professors of Educational Administration

Increasingly, the work of professors of educational administration will involve pursuing their own learning, hopefully, within communities of practice. This will be important because

supporting people aspiring to become educational leaders and administrators must focus on them becoming competent and confident as instructional leaders. For example, if principals are evaluating teachers and education begins shifting according to the common core standards, teachers are going to need to become proficient in learning for “real world” applications. This involves professors working to create such conditions in the courses they are scheduled to facilitate. Paul (1992) revealed the choice educators face:

The fundamental characteristic of the world students now enter is ever-accelerating change, a world in which information is multiplying even as it is swiftly becoming obsolete and out of date, a world in which ideas are continually restructured, retested, and rethought, where one cannot survive with simply one way of thinking, where one must continually adapt one’s thinking to the thinking of others, where one must respect the need for accuracy and precision and meticulousness, a world in which job skills [practices] must continually be upgraded and perfected – even transformed. We have never had to face such a world before. Education has never before had to prepare students for such dynamic flux, unpredictability, and complexity, for such ferment, tumult, and disarray. We as educators are now on the firing line. Are we willing to fundamentally rethink our methods of teaching? Are we ready for the 21st Century? Are we willing to learn new concepts and ideas? Are we willing to bring new rigor to our own thinking in order to help our students bring that same rigor to theirs? Are we willing, in short, to become critical thinkers so that we might be an example of what our students must internalize and become?

These are profound challenges to the profession. They call upon us to do what no previous generation of teachers was ever called upon to do. Those of us willing to pay the price will have to teach side by side with teachers unwilling to pay the price. This will make our job even more difficult, but now less exciting, not less important, not less rewarding. . . .Let us hope that enough of us will have the fortitude and vision to grasp this reality and transform our lives and our schools accordingly (p. 13).

Our classroom practice must change and we, as educators, must become committed learners. Only in this way can we be role models for students.

Significance of Communities of Practice

The significance of communities of practice offers hope and a sense of direction for those working in education. The first possibility is that communities of practice highlight what is being revealed or not being revealed about learning and identity as we interact with students and they interact with those whom they serve. In acts of learning about something important to the community of practice, this learning extends to a deeper understanding of the learner and others. The second benefit offered by the communities of practice approach is that learning is about meaning. We seek to make sense of our experiences and develop a shared understanding of our world. Multiple interpretations and a myriad of circumstances challenge the stability of meaning. This fluidity of meaning is a result of the mutual engagement that takes place within communities of practice as they “create a shared reality in which to act and

construct an identity” (Wenger, 1998, p. 177). The third benefit to embracing communities of practice and engaging in them is that we may collectively draw upon our power “to negotiate our enterprises and thus to share the context in which we can construct and experience an identity of competence” (Wenger, 1998, p. 175). The fourth benefit offered is that if communities of practice are visible and understood, more humans may be able to act in humanitarian ways.

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