



Communities of practice: A blended strategy for collaborative and participatory instructional exercise among digital natives

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Abstract

The world of today is seen as a global village and a village is made up of various communities that are identified with shared values which give them interest. The conception of the Communities of Practice (CoP) is that learning that takes place in a social situation that emerges and develops gradually when people who have common goals interact as they strive toward those goals. The thrust of this paper is to x-ray Communities of Practice: a blended strategy for collaborative and participatory instructional exercise among digital natives. The paper suggested amongst others that there must be definiteness of purpose in any community of practice so as to allow teachers or instructors and learners to gain meaningfully through collaboration and participation in the activities of the community.

Keywords: communities of practice, digital natives, blended strategy, participatory instruction

Introduction

Community is so ambiguous that it comes by many names – learning communities, e-communities, corporate communities, and communities of practice etc. According to Webster's Dictionary a community is "Any group living in the same area or having interest, work, and so on in common". Pyakurayal (2015) ^[15] affirmed that, for an appropriate understanding of the sociological meaning of the term community, the following vital components could be well-thought-out to be highlighted:

- the existence of a group of people interacting on the basis of mutual dependence and concern;
- the people that live in a distinct and limited geographical area;
- individuals that have a sense of belonging, identification or community consciousness;
- people that have shared communal values, norms and other features of culture;
- the community should have certain needed social institutions like schools, church, governing
- agency, credit agency, etc.

In the view of Wenger-Trayner (2015) ^[5, 22], communities can be small or large, co-located or online, and often possess similar structures and characteristics, their members interact together over time, are held together by a common purpose, distinct roles, rely on trust as the basis of their interactions, and share a sense of history.

In the school system, we have two major collaboration groups that relate to the strategic objectives and responsibilities of many typical teaching and learning functions. These two groups represent people who come together primarily for any one or two distinct reasons: to learn (learning communities

and to practice) (communities of practice). Learning communities focus on a specific learning outcome, in a relationship with aim of achieving the learning outcome and are mostly connected to traditional teaching. They represent communities of learners that may rely on face-to-face or online interactions in order to share experiences, stories, network, and learning from each other over time.

For learners and professionally digital teachers, learning communities are one of the best opportunities to create a blended solution that move learning beyond the classroom. Often facilitated by a teacher, these groups may come together both prior to and after the face-to-face event. The online community provides context prior to the event and then allows participation and collaboration following the in-person gathering.

The paper, therefore, highlighted the meaning of communities of practice, communities of practice as a blended learning strategy, blended learning concept and its characteristics. Additionally, the concept of blended and participatory learning was discussed together with digital natives as they relate to communities of practice among digital natives. Suggestions were made and the conclusion drawn.

Communities of practice

Communities of practice represent a relatively equal mix of relationship, learning, and task orientation. The idea of communities of practice is that learning occurs in social contexts when people who have common goals and targeted vision not only decide to come together but also willing to interact and share ideas together as they strive towards achieving those goals (Etienne and Wenger-Trayner, 2015) ^[5, 22]. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to

do it better as they interact regularly.

The term “communities of practice” is a concept in the educational system that has greatly improved and enhanced social interaction among students in teaching and learning. Communities of practice are formed by people who agreed to come together to engage in a collective and collaborative learning especially in subjects they learning together could give them better understanding comparatively. It is formed by people who agree to come together to engage in a collective and collaborative learning with a specific objective to achieve a targeted goal. This could be a group of teachers who specialized in the same discipline, a group of ambitious students seeking new forms of knowledge, a group of students working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school.

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning working on similar problems, a clique of students defining their psyche in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first – time managers helping each other cope.

In communities of practice, there is flexibility in design and objectives. Members share a commonality of social learning that provides a framework for problem solving, resource creation and sharing, and support, as they leverage in person and online connections and place value on both formal and informal learning opportunities. This sharing, especially, in turn, refines and elaborates McDemott’s description of knowledge sharing as thinking together:

“Sharing knowledge is an act of knowing who will use it and for what purpose. This often involves mutually discovering which insight from the past is relevant in the present”

McDemott, in Pyrko, Dorfler and Eden, (2017).

This continuous conversation often via online and social media helps members to develop a shared practice which creates collective intelligence and later result in an implicitly held knowledge within them.

Communities of practice are more often referred to as Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs). Therefore they require information technologies to support, improve and develop the learning process and outcome of member’s interactions. Chikh and Berkani (2010) ^[4] averred that several studies (Develotte; Dillenbourg, Poirier and Carles; and La ferriere) related to CoPs in the teaching domain in general and many online learning communities use course management system such as Blackboard has also been widely used in online education. It should be noted that communities of practice can be very effective in a digital class, where internet is immensely utilized. The Internet is one of the innovative technologies used in teaching and learning.

The Internet is a large network of computers connecting people and information. By browsing the internet, learners can access shelves of the library, access information on seemingly limitless interests which creates tremendous possibilities for them to expand the realm of educational opportunities. The internet offers life-long learning occupied by communities of practice and self-learning through collaborative learning,

sharing of knowledge and experience and crowdsourcing new ideas and development.

According to Murphy (2003) ^[10], the usage of internet in the educational system has removed traditional place and time obstacles and has provided learners with access to information whenever and wherever they want. However most online learning is conducted by having students and instructors interact primarily through the internet, an alternative form called blended learning combines the internet with face-to-face in class instruction (Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003) ^[13]. A neighbourhood, for instance, is often called a community but is usually not a community of practice.

For a community to be a community of practice three crucial characteristics according to Rahul (2012) ^[17] must be present;

- 1. Domain:** Domain gives an identity to the communities of practice. The members of a community share a common domain of interest. Domain tells about what type of information is to be shared within the community.
- 2. Community:** Community is a group of people who belong to the same domain and share knowledge in order to help each other. Communities of practice have communities in which people share the knowledge they possess in a particular domain by conducting activities like group discussions and meetings.
- 3. Practice:** It is defined as the set of ways to do the work in domains such as communication and problem sharing. Communities of practice have a well-defined set of activities to be adapted in sharing knowledge within the community.

It is the combination of these three elements that constitute a community of practice. And it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one constitutes such a community (Etienne and Wenger-Trayner, 2015) ^[5, 22].

Communities of practice as a blended learning strategy

The community of practice as a blended learning strategy for collaborative and participatory academic exercise to enhance learning implies that there must be an area of interest or an area over which a person has a control-the domain. The domain must have a shared interest to which every member in it subscribes to and that defines their identity as their membership is defined by their commitment to the domain. For example, undergraduate students and masters’ students in any higher institution may subscribe to belong to a domain in the WhatsApp group, which every student shares the same interest (learning) and control, and by so doing, it has given them an identity to live with as regards to their academic programme.

Also, the domain has given the students, the feeling of belonging to a community where resources, information are amongst them as they engage in discussions and joint activities thereby building relationships that help them learn. This has implications for schools, as Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues in Smith (2003) ^[19] suggest that they must prioritize instructions that build on children’s interests in a collaborative way. The WhatsApp platform provides the avenue for sharing information as regard to a particular learning area (topic), lecture time table and date, assignment to be done, how they will be done and when they will be

submitted.

The practice requires sustained interest and interaction which invariably will take time. Members of the community will always be committed to it as it helps enhance learning through thoughtful discussions as knowledge and activity have an intimate and symbiotic relationship. The interest and interaction in most cases serve as motivation to the members to achieve the set objective eventually.

Blended learning

The term blended learning is the practice of using both online and in-person learning experiences when teaching students. In a blended learning course, for example, students might attend a class taught by a teacher in a traditional classroom setting, while in this case, in-class time may be either replaced or supplemented by online learning experiences, and students would learn about the same topics online as they do in class, and the online and in person learning experiences would parallel and complement one another (Garrison and Vaughn, 2007) ^[7]. In a similar vein it is seen by Horn and Staker in Buono (2017) ^[3] as a “formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some elements of student control over time, place, path and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised block-and-mortar location away from home.” Blended learning can also be called hybrid learning and mixed-mode learning.

Blended learning experiences vary widely in design and implementation from school to school. For example, blended learning may be provided in an existing school by only a few teachers or it may be the dominant learning delivery model around which a school’s academic programme is designed. Online learning may be a minor component part of a classroom based course or video recorded lectures, live video and text chats, and other digitally enabled learning activities may be a student’s primary instructional interactions with a teacher. In some cases, students may work independently meeting with teachers to review their learning progress, discuss that work, ask questions, or receive assistance for difficult concepts.

Obi (2016) ^[11] opined that blended learning can also be viewed as a combination of traditional delivery (classroom setting) method with online or technology driven delivery method. The major essence of blended learning pedagogy is to promote collaboration. Blended learning is a combination of the traditional and interactive form of learning which includes multimedia, virtual classroom, email, online technology and video conferencing, together with classroom training. Collaboration involves social processes in the academic problem-solving situation. It also includes learners learning how to solve problems on their own and as well as improvements in communication and critical thinking. It also increases learner’s satisfaction and greater achievement with course objectives and changes in learning practice. No wonder then that Vikoo (2017) ^[21], captured blended learning metaphorically as “ just as people use a variety of tones, pitches, rhythm, timbre, loudness, inflections, gestures, etc. to communicate ideas to others, a teacher should use a variety of media to aid the transfer of learning.”

The processes of learning through collaboration broaden

learners’ perspective and expose learners to one another’s ideas and concepts. The combination of online element and traditional delivery facilitate and promote learners coming together to exchange perspectives and ideas. In blended learning, both the learners and instructors benefit from the collaborative learning process. Senior instructors share their experiences and techniques with junior instructors. There is also an opportunity to employ what is termed as reciprocal monitoring, in which a pair of instructors compliments each other in term of pedagogical approach, technology delivery, teaching philosophy and course assessment. This reciprocal mentoring helps solve some of the age old online issues that some instructors come in contact with in terms of sacrificing of course content for technology related issues. This technology issues can be experienced at either faculty or student end.

Collaborative learning and participatory instruction

Collaborative instruction is seen as a free and unlimited deliberation of a problem or problems by a collaborative group of persons talking together under the direction of one of its members. The collaborative instructional exercise borders on the intelligent exchange of opinion in a topic or an object so that the teacher/instructor/facilitator monitors discussion to ensure that it is directed towards the attainment of the objective(s) of the lesson. Collaborative learning is a way of engaging students actively in the learning processes and the learning activities can take place in and out of the classroom (Finks, 2007) ^[6].

This comprises all things from listening to practicing which help the students to absorb what they hear and apply course materials to real life situation. These activities embrace five main components, which are; positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal and small group social skills, and group processing. The collaborative instruction thus encourages a healthy learning situation when it is properly moderated by the teacher. Obih (2017) ^[12] opinionated that this type of instructional exercise allows the contribution of every member of the class, thereby enriching the knowledge of everyone in the class. The collaborative instructional exercise involves a process of exploring the environment (community) that leads to asking questions. It also provides examples for students to experience such activities as observing and classifying which will eventually boost their academic achievement of the subject matter.

On the other hand, participatory learning is a teaching strategy that integrates themes or content area or topic that is of interest to the learners. Rose in Akuakanwa (2016) ^[1] upheld that learners are encouraged to take ownership of their learning as well as collaborate with the teacher. Participatory learning involves a dual operation of learning, whereby the teacher and students collaborate with each other, with the teacher acting as a guide or facilitator. The topics are generated based on students’ realities and previous experience which make for an authentic and meaningful learning experience (Larsen and Anderson, 2011) ^[9].

In a participatory class, the students can either work in pairs, small groups or in the whole group. Activities such as role play, dramatization, simulation, dialogue, problem solving among others, are employed to find solutions to instructional

issues. This approach can be used to teach a wide variety of topics, as it develops critical thinking and creative ways to address learning and pressing social issues, thereby helping to minimize the boredom associated with teaching and learning of some disciplines.

Digital natives

This term advocates a familiarity with technology. Digital natives refer to a novel set of students enrolling in educational programmes that are, the young generation as (native speakers) of the digital language of computers, social media, videos, video games and among other sites on the internet (Prensky, 2001) ^[14]. Digital natives are clam with technology and computers at the initial age and see technology to be an integral and required part of their lives. Teenagers and children today are generally considered to be digital natives as they mainly communicate and learn via computers and texting. Some of the characteristics of digital natives are; they prize freedom and speed, they love to customize things, they are natural collaborators and participants, cherish conversation, seek fun, innovate, surf the net whenever an assignment is given to them among many others.

To meet the distinctive learning needs of digital natives, Investopedia (2017) ^[8] advocates that digital tools are able to respond immediately to the natural, exploratory and interactive learning style of students today. These tools will help in creating a community of practice among the students by creating constant accessibility, immediacy and mobility to teachers/facilitators/instructors. Hence, learning how to use these digital tools not only provides unique learning opportunities for digital natives, but they also provide the necessary skills that will define their future success in the digital age. Digitalization has no doubt brought about a rude shift to a radical change in our students. Today's students are no longer the people our traditional educational system was designed to teach (Prensky, 2001) ^[14].

Communities of practice among digital natives

In line with the views of United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2017) ^[20], for there to be a blend of communities of practice among digital natives so as to encourage collaborative and participatory learning, three key factors need to be considered.

These factors are; accessing new knowledge, networking and developing collective intelligence.

Accessing new knowledge-the traditional knowledge does not understand the world of the 21st century and for this sharp misunderstanding to be addressed, the basic knowledge of the digital natives need to be improved so highly from read, write, and count. This is because knowledge cannot be abridged to the addition of traditional school subjects. There is an incredible accumulation of knowledge that cannot be abridged to the addition of traditional school subjects. There is an incredible accumulation of knowledge, the knowledge that is ever more complex.

Networking – in time past, individuals were used to categorizing and pyramidal structures in organizations and in their ways of doing things, thereby making them be aligned to a particular method of life. However, in recent times, the entrance of networks has diversified the way of doing things

and likewise learning, as networks are everywhere. A network could be seen as a set of points (pieces of information, persons, web pages, and so on) linked by controls (direct access, a click of the mouse, internet connection, and so on). In a network, one finds completely different hierarchies, as one can assess a point in many ways.

Developing collective intelligence – In years past, education was seen as that of individual competences, individual intelligence, and individual memory, among others. Currently, networking, collaboration and participation through information communication technology permit various means of cooperating and developing novel ideas, at a collective level. Collective intelligence is the key. Collective intelligence does not necessarily mean the add ups/add-ons of individual intelligence in a group; alternatively, it comprises a type of added value, a form of intelligence that cannot be reached at the individual level.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of this work; Communities of Practice: a Blended Strategy for Collaborative and Participatory Instructional Exercise among Digital Natives, the following suggestions were offered.

1. For any community of practice, there must be definiteness of purpose so as to detect error and illusion.
2. The individual/learners and participants need to be very conversant with technology as it is the main language of communication.
3. Acquiring knowledge in any community should be considered in the context of complexity, whole among other forms as its diversification is encouraged through the network.
4. The Government should support in providing an enabling environment for accelerated Information and Communication Technology (ICT) compliance among students and faculty.

Conclusion

As the body is made up of component parts that make the whole body and the proper functioning of each part leads to the complete well-being of the body, so is communities of practice. The characteristics of the community should be taken into consideration when initiating any community of practice. In addition, it relates to digital natives who also need to be guided by the teacher/instructor for there to be a blend of instructional exercise. Through this, learners could participate and collaborate effectively for all (teachers/instructors and learners) to gain meaningfully.

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