

Selected Writings on Frameworks and Optimization of Communities of Practice: An Annotated Bibliography

One of the essential factors that influences my choice to join a school as an instructor past the initial year of classroom instruction is the existence or non-existence of a supportive, innovative teaching community. Essentially, I believe that schools where faculty members are active stakeholders in a collective environment that encourages reflective practice tend to promote healthier, more successful teacher development, which is why I have been so surprised by my personal experience and secondhand accounts of colleagues that work or have worked in unsupported environments. This selection of readings aims to identify working definitions, frameworks and criticisms of communities of practice through examination of originating literature, research into current Web 2.0 technology-based practices and articles directed at leadership and planning roles in various organizations—the purpose of which is to analyze how to apply and refine this social learning system to professional development environments, specifically in education.

Ardichvili, A., Maurer, M., Li, W., Wentling, T., Stuedemann, R. (2006). Cultural influences on knowledge sharing through online communities of practice. *Journal of Knowledge Management, 10*(1), 94-107.

Following a literature review to build a list of possible cultural factors that would affect participation in cross-cultural communities of practice, patterns of information sharing were examined in online environments for a multinational corporation. The article focuses on cultural context and quality and style of communication online and offline between colleagues. The results of this qualitative research could be used as a starting point for leaders and organizers working with diverse worker populations. Further examination of deep cultural factors and connection to specific behavioral trends in online communication is necessary as this research did not lead to any significant conclusions.

Brown, J.S., Duguid, P. (1991). Organizational learning and communities of practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning, and innovation. *Organization Science, 2*(1), 40-57.

This article asserts that actual work and innovation done in organizations differs from how those aspects are defined in manuals, job descriptions and professional development; “downskilling”, or the simplification of tasks into steps intended to be completed by workers of any experience level, is spotlighted as a commonly-used strategy that creates a wedge between corporations and their workers. Brown and Duguid identify three areas, narration, collaboration and social construction, that help build the shared knowledge and the identity of the working community. Here, the building of individual workers’ identities and roles within the community is noted as valuable to the efficacy of the organization. This article describes the perspectives and

issues from both management and workers in a way that works towards constructive development and is quite helpful.

Eckert, P. (2006). Communities of practice. *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2, 683-685.

Applying theory of communities of practice to linguistics and studied of social language development, Eckert differentiates between “speech communities” that are defined along geographic areas and socioeconomic lines and communities of practice that are built on shared commitment and experience. Anecdotal examples articulate how speech communities provide broad demographic separations, while social identity, or membership in a community of practice, is more deeply tied to specific development of social language, or slang. This article is aimed at those interested in sociolinguistics and strategies for studying development of social language. For educators, it provides a functional model of how communities of practice are identified and function in non-educational fields.

Gunawardena, C.N., Hermans, M.B., Sanchez, D., Richmond, C., Bohley, M., Tuttle, R. (2009). A theoretical framework for building online communities of practice with social networking tools. *Educational Media International*, 46(1), 3-16.

This article examines use of social networking tools and application of current learning theories and practices through a literature review and active research. The authors summarize the role and engagement with social networking tools in communities of practice and defines Web 2.0 social networking environment in terms of established educational frameworks. Rather than achieving the stated goal of redefining theoretical frameworks to accommodate new opportunities provided by Web 2.0 technologies, the authors simply used their own social networking based community of practice to show that it is possible to have a community of practice online. The article would be beneficial to novices interested in using specific social networking tools (e.g. wikipedia, delicious) to create communities of practice.

Hoadley, C.M., Kilner, P.G. (2005). Using technology to transform communities of practice into knowledge-building communities. *SIGGROUP Bulletin*. 25(1), 31-40.

Hoadley and Kilner outline advantages of using technology in construction of online communities of learning in terms of the C4P model (Content, Conversation, Connection, Context, Purpose). The authors aim to build a technology-enabled and differentiated knowledge-building community that emphasizes information dissemination rather than active practice or shared experiences. Communities of practice are not largely considered or even openly acknowledged in this article, so the title is somewhat misleading. The article itself only shallowly examines pedagogical theories and focuses on the simplified model, which seems like the downscaling mentioned in the article by Brown & Duguid (1991). This model of knowledge-building communities raises concerns about the quality of the shared learning and the role of cognitivist theories in online learning communities.

Lave, J. (1991). Situating learning in communities of practice. *Perspectives on Socially Shared Cognition*, 2, 63-82.

Lave, one of the originators of the theory of communities of practice, analyzes ethnographic studies of apprentice-based learning relationships to illustrate essential aspects of situated social practice, which is defined here as the active social, negotiative processes that form meaning and learning environments. The article introduces the idea that issues in modern learning can originate from the lack of membership into and sustained practice within ongoing communities of learning. A focal point in this article is the current separation between acquisition of knowledge and development of identity—the author is critical of what she describes as “commodification” and “alienation” of learners and the resulting difficulty of transitioning from a newcomer to an old-timer within the community.

Schlager, M.S. & Fusco, J. (2003). Teacher professional development, technology, and communities of practice: Are we putting the cart before the horse? *The Information Society*, 19(3), 203-220.

Schlager & Fusco address the current issue of connecting information technology professional developmental resources to practice. This focus on communities of practice as sources of whole school reform directly relates to my interests in compiling this annotated bibliography. The authors attempt to explain the value of extending traditional, informal, “wild” professional communities among teaching colleagues and the importance of delivering active professional development that aligns with the existing community structure. The goal here is to transform communities of purpose into communities of practice. The information provided here resonates with my personal experience and the examples set forth by similar articles and is helpful in verbalizing common issues with professional development environments at many schools.

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. *Systems Thinker*, 9(5), 2-3.

Wenger outlines communities of practice for management level company leaders and provides strategies for optimizing the work and development of naturally-occurring communities of practice. Though not directed at educators, the article provides strong practical advice for identifying leaders and group roles, legitimizing shared learning and providing support for various group-based work communities. These guidelines can be applied to teaching communities, and this article is valuable from a perspective of implementation, reorganization and balance.

Wenger E. (2000). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization*, 7(2), 225-246.

This article is an extensive, multidimensional examination of communities of practice as set forth by Etienne Wenger, who originally popularized the theory. Consider it a resource for educators seeking to understand the theory, planning and practice of Wenger's model without in-depth counter-analysis. The focus of the article is to describe in detail how organizations can build, maintain and utilize social learning systems to their best advantage. The consistent structure of information, division of essential elements and inclusion of clear, applied examples contributes to the depth and comprehensibility of this overview.