



*Communities of Practice as a framework for understanding
the professional impact of collaborative cultural work*

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
1 DEFINING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE	4
2 COMMUNITIES IN PRACTICE	4
2.1 <i>The significance of community</i>	5
2.2 <i>The significance of practice</i>	6
2.3 <i>Community learning in action</i>	6
3 INDIVIDUALS IN COMMUNITIES	8
3.1 <i>Identity, motivation and engagement</i>	8
3.2 <i>Professional identity: individual versus community</i>	9
4 COMMUNITIES AND ORGANISATIONS	10
4.1 <i>Organisational adoption of CoPs as strategic tools</i>	10
4.2 <i>Communities, knowledge transfer and mobility</i>	11
4.3 <i>Community connectivity, management and performance</i>	13
4.4 <i>Communities of practice and organisational learning</i>	14
5 KEY POINTS OF INTEREST FOR THE STUDY OF COLLABORATIVE CULTURAL WORK	15
REFERENCES	17

INTRODUCTION

Research recently developed and led by the author has begun to explore the impact and added value of cross-sector collaborative work involving arts and cultural organisations¹. This includes for example the evaluation of a national development initiative designed to foster enhanced, innovative collaboration between arts and cultural organisations and public library services; evaluation of a museums-led dementia care training initiative; and current research on the economic value of creative interventions in mental health care. The focus of these studies is the instrumental value for participating services and organisations and implications for associated policy agendas. This will be further enhanced by new research on the efficacy of arts-based social prescribing in mental health care, which will include the co-creation of a regional policy framework.

Such examples of cross-sector collaboration however are also raising interesting questions on the impact upon the 'independent' professional practices and identities of arts and cultural partners. This is especially true for cultural sectors that have prescribed professional pathways, including museums and libraries. Both of the evaluation studies listed above for example have sought to identify the specific contribution of museums and libraries to the collaborative contexts under investigation, based on their unique professional attributes as cultural organisations. This was mostly inspired by an imperative to advocate such unique attributes on behalf of commissioning bodies. Collaborative projects undoubtedly create a meaningful opportunity for arts and cultural organisations to demonstrate their value to a range of 'other' sectors and services.

The impact upon participating arts and cultural organisations themselves however has been so far neglected by this work. It would be interesting to consider, especially in the context of longer-term cross-sector, collaborative cultural work, the extent to which new or perhaps more hybrid professional practices and identities are formed, particularly as new working groups and allegiances are developed beyond individual employing organisations. In relation to arts and cultural programmes that are closely associated with, and co-delivered by health and social services (e.g. social prescription schemes), this may be manifested by a degree of work assimilation between the two professional groups as they each become more familiar with, and confident in, collaborators' complementary skills and practices. This may in turn impact upon the organisational culture of cultural organisations, as they begin to rely upon knowledge, skills and attributes beyond their artistic or cultural forms, in order to fulfil shared objectives.

Inspired by these emerging ideas, the following paper presents a selective review of the literature on 'communities of practice' as a potential conceptual framework for this research going forward. The review refers to literature drawn from management studies, including organisational learning, organisational behaviour and human resource development (HRD) fields. This work is adapted from a previous study undertaken by the author² at the University of Liverpool Management School, which developed a tool for assessing the organisational value of ordained communities of practice (as a HRD structure) for a leading multi-national IT Services company. Throughout the review, concepts of particular interest to the study of collaborative cultural work are highlighted in **orange bold** and summarised at the end of the paper.

¹ For more information please see: <http://iccliverpool.ac.uk/about/cultural-leadership/>

² In collaboration with Prof Elena Antonacopoulou and Prof Allan MacPherson.

1 DEFINING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The following key definition of Communities of Practice, given by leading theorists and writers on the subject, is offered as the conceptual starting point for the discussion that follows:

“Communities of Practice are groups 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.” (Wenger et al, 2002, pp. 4)

Communities of Practice (hereafter CoPs) have become increasingly accepted in the management discipline as vehicles for ‘situated’ learning, generating knowledge and sharing practices within and across a range of work-based and organisational spatial settings (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Gherardi et al, 1998; Amin and Roberts, 2008). They are ‘self-referential cultural systems’ (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002), convened and subsequently defined by a shared sense of purpose, how they function and the input made by individual members, and the generated output or capability produced (Smith, 2003). Members of a CoP regularly engage in sharing and learning based on a set of common interests (Lesser and Storck, 2001), making the community ‘an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Situated learning, the process associated with CoPs, is defined as learning through goal-directed activity in the situation where the learnt or acquired knowledge is to be deployed (Billet, 1996). It forms a bridge between ‘a view according to which cognitive processes (and thus learning) are primary and a view according to which social practice is the primary, generative phenomenon, and learning is one of its characteristics’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, pp. 34). Cultural psychologists have defined the social character of learning as a form of human cognition that is closely related to the material, symbolic and social context in which learning takes place (Gherardi et al, 1998). Different pedagogical approaches are contained within the concept of situated learning, such as ‘deep’ and ‘action’ learning, all of which share a common goal to transmit to ‘novice’ practitioners the complex understanding of practice in the workplace that is characteristic of mature employees and is largely acquired informally (Davenport, 2001).

2 COMMUNITIES *IN* PRACTICE

Communities of practice *in* practice can take many forms and come in various sizes. Wenger et al (2002) describe them as long or short lived; geographically co-located or distributed; homogenous or heterogeneous; inside and across boundaries, such as business units and other organisational structures; spontaneous or intentional; and unrecognised to institutionalized. Their practical learning function lies in their ‘social’ common denominator, enabling learning as belonging by virtue of ‘community’ and learning as doing by virtue of ‘practice’ (Wenger, 1998).

2.1 The significance of community

The original premise of CoPs in practice was one of 'togetherness' based on a sense of individuals sharing a joint enterprise, mutual engagement in that enterprise and the subsequent accumulation of a shared repertoire of communal resources (Wenger 1998). Similarly situated and socio-cultural learning is dependent upon several themes of togetherness and connectivity, including the assumption that expertise is domain-specific; compilation of expertise is negotiated in social circumstances; knowledge transfer is socially and culturally constructed; individuals' efforts and contributions are relational to social practice (Billet, 1996). As such, the concept of community within the study of CoPs has been regarded as pivotal in understanding the ways in which workplace practices and related learning and innovation occur (Brown and Duguid, 1991).

The concept of community itself however is ambiguous, and in everyday language is used loosely and in ways that imply value judgements due to its connotations of harmony, co-operation, unity, altruism and nostalgia (Jewson, 2007a). The societal context in which learning practices occur can be more usefully analysed, it is argued, using network analysis (including boundaries, density, clusters and cliques, and learning trajectories): this would enable the consideration of different types of CoP; an analysis of the sources and outcomes of internal processes such as conflict, inequality and power struggles; and the illumination of social conditions that facilitate innovation and conservatism, all without 'importing into the analysis the ideological baggage associated with the term community' (Jewson, 2007a, pp. 80).

Problems encountered with the study of CoPs include difficulties in defining the group, organisational and extended network boundaries associated with the concept of community (Schenkel and Teigland, 2008). A consequence of acquiring knowledge, skill or competence by being socialized into a 'habitus' is that this is often a non-conscious acquisition, and is thus difficult to articulate and define as a socially constructed learning outcome (Gherardi et al, 1998). Amin and Roberts (2008) argue that as research on CoPs has developed and progressed, the idiosyncrasies of situated learning have become too easily generalised into homogenous, formulaic and readily applied notions of communities, whereas in reality, there are numerous kinds of situated practice with varied processes and outcomes, based on distinct forms of physical and metaphysical social interaction. In recent years for example, ICT developments in electronic discussion groups and on-line chat rooms have facilitated the development of CoPs whose members are not physically co-located (Lesser and Storck, 2001). Changes in work routines and spatial location, such as working from home and multi-site roles, has encouraged the expansion and diffusion of situated learning through the times and spaces of everyday life (Jewson, 2007b). The use of a blanket generic CoP descriptor therefore, as argued by Amin and Roberts (2008), is unhelpful and potentially damaging to the study of the phenomenon.

2.2 The significance of practice

Such thinking has encouraged an alternative emphasis on 'practice' rather than 'community'. Brown and Duguid (1991) observe that workplace learners in communities are primarily concerned with *becoming* practitioners rather than learning *about* practice, and that this is acquired by an embodied ability to behave as community members via actions, beliefs and language. The process of becoming practitioners within communities is achieved via a vicarious learning of practice: a system of activities in which knowing is not separate from doing, and learning is a social and participative rather than a solely cognitive activity (Gherardi, 2000). The concept of **reflective practice**, i.e. thinking about what we are doing, why we are doing it, and communicating this to others facilitates such vicarious learning in social settings (Gherardi et al, 1998).

The actual behaviours of CoPs are 'constantly changing both as newcomers replace old-timers and as the demands of practice force the community to revise its relationship to its environment' (Brown and Duguid, 1991, pp. 50), inferring that practice is the key variable in shaping community identity and boundaries. CoPs are thus regarded as aggregations defined by the shared manner in which members do things and interpret events, rather than by members alone (Gherardi et al, 1998). Boundaries that help to define physical and meta-physical, located and dispersed communities include shared artefacts, discourses (i.e. a common 'language') and processes (Wenger, 2000) which are shared practices, co-ordinated and replicated irrespective of time and place.

Boundary objects also support situated action, and as points of convergence of practices and opinions, they can act as catalysts for innovation in communities (Davenport, 2001). Practice in itself defines boundaries for communities in terms of the idiosyncratic relationships and ways of engaging with each other formed between members, including the detailed and complex understanding of the shared enterprise as members, and the development of a shared repertoire with references that are unclear to outsiders (Wenger, 1998).

2.3 Community learning in action

The functionality of a CoP is managed and articulated by the development of resources such as tools, documents, routines, vocabulary and symbols that store and communicate the accumulated knowledge and collective memory of that community (Smith, 2003). The process involved in the collection of such artefacts emulates social learning theory (SLT) and associated practices: rooted in behaviourism, SLT states that human behaviour is learned in interpersonal situations using primarily the principles of observation and imitation (Rollinson, 2005). SLT therefore regards knowledge as something that people do, in comparison to cognitive approaches to learning whereby knowledge is perceived as a commodity or something that people have, and as something that is acquired as a way of being in the world dependent on social context and interaction (Pastoors, 2007).

More implicitly, collective memory and resources are also associated with the generation of **social capital**, a term used to describe less tangible community resources such as shared values, trust and metaphors (Field, 2003). Lesser and Storck (2001) argue that the strength of CoPs lie in their capacity to develop social capital and subsequently influence behavioural change. Wenger et al (2002) describe social capital in communities as a 'pool of goodwill', whereby members contribute to the community in the trust that they will benefit from it too at some point. When considering learning as a social construction, Brown and Duguid (1991) state that learners can be seen to construct their understanding out of a wide range of materials including ambient social and physical circumstances and the histories and social relations of people involved. CoPs are described as the basic building blocks of a social learning system, as they are the 'social containers of the competences that make up such a system' (Wenger, 2000, pp. 229).

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe the *process* of learning in communities as one of social participation including stages or 'types' of engagement. This includes the legitimate peripheral participation of new members as they enter the community, who move towards full participation at the 'centre' of the community via the mastery of knowledge, skills, artefacts, identities, and activities practised by existing members. Irrespective of stages in the process, learning in communities can always be defined by the *competence* that is established over time, and ongoing experience as a member (Wenger, 2000). Individuals in communities learn from one another via sources of proximal or distal guidance (Billet, 1996). Proximal guidance would refer to direct forms of interpersonal tuition, instruction and support, and non-direct forms such as observation and listening; distal guidance is found in everyday activities of the community, and physical and environmental cues in historical and socio-cultural community practice.

As an example of non-direct proximal guidance, Schenkel and Teigland (2008), during a study of CoPs in a construction company, note the value of storytelling amongst employees in helping individuals to interpret events and diagnose problems via the development of a shared experiential causal map. Brown and Duguid (1991) describe three phases of the phenomenon: the first, *narration*, describes the stage during which the relationship between narrative, narrator and audience to the specific events of practice is communicated. The narration acts as a repository of that accumulated wisdom. The second phase, *collaboration*, represents the fact that accumulated insight is socially constructed and distributed between multiple participants rather than privately on an individual basis. Thirdly, *social construction* is used to define the process by which a shared understanding is developed and used to inform individual and collective professional identities. As a social construct, learning and acquired knowledge is then owned by the participation framework, the community, rather than the individual (Gherardi et al, 1998).

Theories of proximal and distance guidance add a new dimension to the debate on physical (e.g. co-located communities with a defined and shared space) and meta-physical (e.g. an online network) forms of CoPs, what constitutes a community in practice, and the point at which situated learning has taken place. Effective learning

in communities is dependent on three variables as identified by Smith (2003): applied social learning provides a deeper and acknowledged *relevance* for the learner; communities require full participation; there should be an intimate connection between knowledge and activity. It is this application of acquired 'procedural' knowledge that distinguishes situated learning from other learning activities (Billet, 1996). Gherardi et al (1998) extend the concept to that of a *situated curriculum*, to include learning opportunities related to a specific occupation (in a work-based context), applied via a set of local material, economic, symbolic and social characteristics of the system of practices and work activities.

3 INDIVIDUALS IN COMMUNITIES

3.1 Identity, motivation and engagement

The perceived value of CoPs to individual members in organisations includes short-term benefits such as help with challenges; access to expertise; meaningful participation; and sense of belonging. Suggested long-term benefits include strong sense of **professional identity**; increased marketability and employability; enhanced professional reputation; a network for keeping abreast of a particular field; and forum for expanding skills and expertise (Wenger et al, 2002). Archibald et al (2006) describe individual benefits of community membership on three levels: human capital (increased personal knowledge); social capital (stronger relationships); and intellectual capital (better access to data and documents). Social learning, the process by which such a forum would operate, is described as a creative achievement dependent upon personal investment and active participation (Gherardi et al, 1998), and as a means of the development of a 'new' (although perhaps also a reinforced) identity based on participation in a system of situated practices. Personal motivation and 'participatory appropriation' will affect the evolution and effectiveness of a situated curriculum of this kind (Gherardi et al, 1998, pp. 289).

Wenger (2000) identifies three distinct modes of belonging through which people participate in social learning systems: engagement, involving doing things together; imagination, involving constructing an image of ourselves, our communities and wider environment, in order to position ourselves and explore possibilities; and alignment, making sure that local activities are aligned with other processes to ensure their effectiveness beyond our own engagement. Identity is similarly crucial to social learning systems for three reasons: firstly identities combine competence and experience into a way of knowing, identifying who we trust and what we understand; secondly, our ability to deal productively with boundaries depends on our ability to engage and suspend our identities; thirdly, identities are a means by which communities and boundaries become real world experiences (Wenger, 2000, pp. 239). Lave and Wenger (1991) conceive of identities as long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice, thus meaning that identity, knowing and social membership 'entail one another'.

The professional identity of individuals may also affect the ways in which they use and interact with CoPs and shape community boundaries, for example, in a study of how different types of occupational groups learn within social settings, once individuals had acquired a body of *professional* (rather than task-based or creative) knowledge, this group seemed to benefit from virtual knowledge exchanges and communication with geographically dispersed members of the wider profession, suggesting a limited usefulness for the original CoP and a definable point at which certain communities reach maturity (Amin and Roberts, 2008). Issues of identity are also linked to those of individual and collective accountability when considering individual engagement with communities of practice: engagement in any joint enterprise implies mutual accountability amongst those taking part, where equally, competence and achievement should be recognised and appreciated within the community (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002).

Issues of accountability, competence and reputation are also linked to power relations within communities: power-distance relationships for example are potentially divisive where member participation and contribution may be inhibited by the presence of more senior organisational members; such forms of identity-development and participation are critical to the ways in which individual members adopt, challenge or reject the practices of their community (Pemberton et al, 2007). The role of the individual is perhaps more significant than traditional theories of learning communities suggest in terms of the way in which practices are processed and adopted, and subsequently are 'enacted through a history of personally founded negotiations between the individual and the social world that arise' (Billett, 2007, pp. 65). Brannan (2007) observes that issues of identity have an impact within an emotional labour context, including genderised processes by which newcomers are initiated within communities and subsequently represented in practice.

3.2 Professional identity: individual versus community

A sense of identity provides a means of being oneself and of presenting and narrating oneself: it presents a way of acting in the world and a way of positioning oneself in the world we help to create (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). Knowing, learning and sharing knowledge are things that we do to conform to a perceived identity and sense of belonging (Wenger, 2000). Individual professional identities and associated egos within CoPs may affect the homogeneity/heterogeneity balance and impact upon community value and performance. Four factors affecting this relationship between individual identity and community performance as identified by Amin and Roberts (2008) include professional integrity and autonomy; peer validation; trustworthiness and collective commitment (or lack of). Where CoPs are ordained as vehicles to enable cultural conformity to a specific organisational identity, this may be in conflict with self-regulatory methods preferred by individual members, thus stifling creativity and innovation within that community (Pemberton et al, 2007).

Conversely, participation in the practices of homogenous communities may facilitate the construction and reinforcement of individual professional identities and

behaviours (Wenger, 1998), giving professional knowledge a social legitimacy and authoritativeness (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). As such, a community's membership must have critical mass to guarantee interest, but maintaining the focus of the community to preserve collective identity (Wenger, 2000). In this respect, discussing identity in social terms 'is not denying individuality but viewing the very definition of individuality as something that is part of the practices of specific communities' (Wenger, 1998, pp. 146).

4 COMMUNITIES AND ORGANISATIONS

4.1 Organisational adoption of CoPs as strategic tools

Whilst the concept of CoPs in itself is not new, it is the need for organisations to become more strategically systematic with regard to organisational learning and knowledge management that has driven the adoption of CoPs as central business functions (Wenger et al, 2002). The formalization, support and advocacy of CoPs are practised by managers in the hope of using knowledge to improve the company's competitive advantage (Schenkel and Teigland, 2008). Liedtka (1999) positions CoPs as a long-term strategic platform for enabling competitive advantage via the development of organisational 'metacapabilities' – skills and knowledge that facilitate capability building. Evidence suggests that where a system of CoPs is in place, this has contributed to successful business acquisition and higher levels of service for existing customers (Archibald et al, 2006). The concepts of learning in communities and situated learning have been similarly adopted within organisations in relation to training and development strategies (Smith, 2003), with the view that CoPs offer organisational benefits alongside the facilitation of individual employee development, particularly with respect to talent recruitment and retention. In this respect, the CoP concept has had most impact and subsequent application within the Human Resource Management (HRM) field (Hughes et al, 2007). Hughes (2007) goes on to argue that the concept is in danger of being hijacked by HRM practitioners with a view to utilising communities for the objective of 'learning for' productive gain.

Perceived short-term benefits of CoPs to organisations include providing an arena for problem solving; improved quality of decision-making; co-ordination, standardization and synergy across business units; resources for implementing strategies; best practice and strengthened quality assurance. Potential long-term benefits include the ability to execute a strategic plan; authority with clients; increased retention of talent; knowledge-based alliances; emergence of unplanned capabilities; and forum for benchmarking against rest of industry (Wenger et al, 2002). As such, Archibald et al (2006) observe that new forms of ordained community are emerging that are more aligned and integrated to organisations' business goals and challenges by way of leveraging knowledge for optimal performance, and improved processes relating to problem solving, decision making, knowledge transfer and organisational learning strategies.

Benchmarking and best practice functions of CoPs (on an internal basis) have their own limitations: any consensus of approach agreed by members may be construed as best practice, thus compromising any innovative practices that may subsequently be associated with 'bad' practice, or perceived as conflicting with other organisational processes and procedures (Pemberton et al, 2007). Wenger et al (2002) point to the strategic value of CoPs as benchmarking functions on an industry level, as active, mature communities establish ongoing relationships with other organisations to compare and refine practices or develop new ones.

Traditionally CoPs are perceived as *informal* emerging entities that represent emerging themes created around activities, and activities shaped around social relations, which subsequently become part of the community's individual identity and can be perpetuated in time (Gherardi et al, 1998). Brown and Duguid (1991) report a tension between ordained groups or communities within organisations, sanctioned by order of organisational objectives and tasks, and more fluid emergent communities, shaped in the process of activity rather than to perform a task, that are non-canonical and cross organisational boundaries. Work-based learning and practices need to be understood in terms of these emerging communities, as 'the reorganization of the workplace into canonical groups can wittingly or unwittingly disrupt these highly functional non-canonical – and therefore often invisible – communities' (Brown and Duguid, 1991, pp. 49).

The extent to which membership of a community is a voluntary commitment, or formally tied to job role and career progression and therefore regarded as mandatory, will also impact upon member perceptions, engagement and community vitality (Pemberton et al, 2007). For example, in a comparative study of formal 'top down' CoPs and emergent 'underground' versions in the consultant unit of a large international information technology business, in some cases consultants regarded the ordained system as restrictive, controlling and patronising, which inhibited the 'natural' pursuit of professional interests and subsequent development (Pastoors, 2007). Voluntary membership of 'underground' CoPs however through a common interest and shared passion for certain topics provided emotional containment and stability.

4.2 Communities, knowledge transfer and mobility

The strategic value of CoPs within a knowledge management context lies in their proposed capacity to share and transfer the *tacit* knowledge possessed by individuals and groups in organisations (Schenkel and Teigland, 2008). The sharing of expertise and the creation of new, often tacit, knowledge is the central tenet of a CoP's existence whether it be an emergent social gathering, technological network or a sanctioned and managed work team (Pemberton et al, 2007). Amin and Roberts (2008) observe that, particularly amongst professional practitioners, interaction between different *types* of community is essential for the effective exchange of information and dissemination of innovation. This suggests a preference or a requirement for extended connectivity across communities, and the formulation of communities beyond specific practices. Billet (1996) however suggests that for the

effective transfer of situated learning and relevant knowledge to apply, there needs to be some level of social, practical and situational consistency, including the co-construction of knowledge by situation and circumstance, and the perceived appropriateness of its deployment in other circumstances.

Lam (2000) presents four community-based or 'societal' organisational learning models with the potential to facilitate **tacit knowledge transfer** and exchange, including Professional (elitist education based with a high degree of knowledge formalization); Bureaucratic (organised around narrowly defined jobs and hierarchical career structure); Occupational Community (regional clusters of inter-dependent occupations and firms); and Organizational Community (based on broadly defined jobs, internal labour markets and continuous career hierarchy). The formation and use of lateral groups and networks within organisations, across operational functions and on inter-disciplinary platforms, has the potential to merge such concepts and thus avoid restrictive membership silos. Wenger (2000) cites cross-disciplinary projects within organisations as examples whereby members of specific CoPs combine the knowledge of multiple practices to achieve certain outcomes via simultaneous participation in CoPs and project teams.

The facilitation of horizontal learning within organisations across specific boundaries, functions and workgroups cannot in essence be captured by the notion of CoPs as bound by practice (Boud and Middleton, 2003): it is here that the concept of 'communities of interest' emerge as potentially valid organisational tools. In a study of emergent CoPs within an event-based Public Private Partnership (PPP), Juriado and Gustafsson (2007) observed that despite the non-conscious formation of a CoP by those engaged in the project, the emergent community displayed rapid problem solving, transferred best practice and contributed towards innovative strategic development. Competence and capabilities were generated between differing organisations by a shared interest in and ownership of the project and mutual trust in wanting the event to be a success.

The transfer of knowledge within and across communities is achieved on several levels, including formal, informal and discursive (Nicolini and Mezner, 1995; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). The 'commodification' of knowledge by organizations has encouraged theorising of the concept as individual, strategic and practice-based (Gherardi, 2000): the first views the production, circulation and consumption of knowledge as autonomous activities; the second considers knowledge as a strategic asset, located at the head of the company and determining corporate performance. The resource-based theory for example defines knowledge as core competencies or capabilities. Thirdly, the concept of knowledge as practice considers that components of knowledge occur in everyday organizational life, including work, learning, innovation, communication, negotiation, conflict interpretation, and are therefore co-present in practice. Engestrom (2007) describes the concept of 'process management' within organisations, the platform for co-ordinating large, diverse communities and high level of complexity, developing shared purpose across organisational units, and co-ordinating work among various skills and competencies along the value chain.

Factors impeding effective knowledge transfer within and between CoPs include internal competition: where information and knowledge is treated as a commodity by employing corporations, internal communities may feel reluctant to share knowledge freely and thus destabilise their own competitive position (Brown and Duguid, 1991). The situated curriculum is similarly dependent on a willingness to collaborate: the ways in which interpersonal relations facilitate or limit access to activities, artefacts, information and social relations will profoundly affect the situated curriculum and associated community learning (Gherardi et al, 1998). Power-relations within and across communities will impact upon an individual's willingness and capacity to share knowledge and information or critically appraise practices, particularly when fearful of being criticised or undermined by more senior or experienced members (Pemberton et al, 2007).

4.3 Community connectivity, management and performance

Effective management, **leadership and governance** are key attributes in a community's success and in maintaining healthy communities (Archibald et al, 2006), as a link has been established between high performing communities and active support and sponsorship from senior management within organisations. Pemberton et al (2007) observe that leaderless communities seldom survive, become fragmented or lose momentum. A community needs multiple forms of leadership, including pioneers, 'thought leaders', networkers, people who document and store practice (Wenger (2000). Levels of innovation and creativity in CoPs can be inadvertently affected by the level at which the community is managed in a hierarchical or decentred way (Amin and Roberts, 2008). In formalised management practices, people are typically viewed as performing their jobs according to job descriptions and are thus held accountable to canonical descriptions and overly conceptual managerial outlooks that do not recognise and acknowledge non-canonical daily improvisations and innovative actions (Brown and Duguid, 1991). Thus management that is conscious of and sensitive to specific community activities, characteristics and nuances is likely to be more successful.

Creativity and innovation within CoPs are also affected by the extent to which individual communities contribute and are receptive to the flow of knowledge to and from other sources (Amin and Roberts, 2008). Levels of connectivity within and between communities, facilitating relationships between people, information and media, are integral to their success (Wenger, 2000). It is suggested by some that a certain degree of flexibility and fluidity in knowledge sharing and exchange is required for CoPs to achieve optimum performance: Schenkel and Teigland (2008) for example argue that CoPs can be susceptible to rigidity and become eventual 'competency traps', preserving inappropriate knowledge sets that are unresponsive to changing market conditions. In a study of different workgroups (providing operational and support functions) in a single organisation, Boud and Middleton (2003) observe that despite belonging to a bureaucracy with homogenised work practices, policies and procedures, each workgroup exhibited unique contextual

learning experiences, illustrating the potential difficulties inherent in ordaining and managing formal learning communities.

A causal relationship between CoP effectiveness and organisational learning and performance is to date not clearly evidenced in the literature (Schenkel and Teigland, 2008). Pemberton et al (2007) observe that, whilst the potential benefits of CoPs to individuals and organisations should not be disputed, evidence to date is largely anecdotal and can be regarded as somewhat overly positive and 'rose-tinted' in nature, risking the perception of the concept as a management fad or buzz-word (Archibald et al, 1996). In order to be truly organisational, knowledge produced must be communicable, consensual, and integrated into the organisation itself from individual and community sources, presenting challenges for performance management on micro and macro scales (Nicolini and Meznar, 1995).

Archibald et al (2006) have begun to establish performance indicators, at individual and organisational levels, based on a study of 52 CoPs across 10 organisations including significant funding for face-to-face events; ensuring that community activities address business needs; provision of CoP leader training; and ensuring high levels of sponsor expectation. Interaction, connectivity and governance are key issues in ensuring clear lines of communication and exchange on a micro to macro continuum within organisations, with communities as the conduit for that exchange (Wenger, 2000). There is general agreement that in large organisations, CoPs can be regarded as 'performance enablers' through their application as a system across organisational silos (Pastoors, 2007). Lesser and Storck (2001) argue that the key strength through which CoPs are able to influence organisational performance is the development and maintenance of social capital among community members along structural, relational and cognitive dimensions.

4.4 Communities of practice and organisational learning

Nicolini and Meznar (1995) identify four key contextual factors of the organisational learning process, including culture, strategy, structure and environment. The learning organisation is defined as having the enhanced capacity to adapt, change, grow and learn (Furnham, 2005), via effective management of organisational knowledge and expertise. The situated curriculum described by Gherardi et al (1998) is defined as one of the ways in which cultural and material knowledge is institutionalized in CoPs, and as such, the merger of the two concepts can be regarded as an important mechanism for organisational learning. By regarding the whole organisation as a single community, or delineating by internal CoPs, an organisation makes an explicit statement concerning its culture, values and strategic alignment and its investment in knowledge management. Recommendations for strategic design and implementation of CoPs as vehicles for organisational learning include the construction of learning as a process of participation; an emphasis on learning (rather than teaching) via practice-led opportunities; the engagement of communities in the design of their practice as a place of learning; and the provision of resources needed to negotiate connections with other practices within the organisation (Wenger, 1998).

However, Boud and Middleton (2003) warn against the limitations of CoPs as vehicles for the collective management of *informal* learning in organisations, due to the difficulties in convening or describing organisational workgroups and departments as CoPs, particularly where differences of function or a lack of common activities exist. Similarly, practices that traverse the boundaries of several (identifiable) communities may exist, thus creating a wider network of interconnected practices both within and beyond individual organisations (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). Fuller (2007) writes of the ‘underdeveloped’ nature of CoPs both as a research topic and an applied management practice, which leaves the concept open to interpretation and difficult to operationalise in a consistent fashion. As such ‘an exclusive focus on CoPs as an organising concept may limit accounts of workplace learning which reflect the complexities of actual practice’, and limit the kinds of intervention possible to influence workplace learning (Boud and Middleton, 2003, pp. 201). Indeed any kind of established framework, it is argued, can restrict the process of organisational learning and limit the extent to which new knowledge can be created (Nicolini and Meznar, 1995).

From an outward looking perspective, CoPs should form only one part of an organisational learning strategy: extended social learning networks are essential, as hoarding knowledge internally gives the impression of defensiveness and insularity, risking exclusion from the most significant knowledge exchanges (Wenger, 2000).

5 KEY POINTS OF INTEREST FOR THE STUDY OF COLLABORATIVE CULTURAL WORK

Reflective practice

- Is reflective practice an instinctive phenomenon in collaborative cultural work?
- Does reflective practice facilitate effective knowledge generation and professional development in collaborative cultural work?
- Does reflective practice create ‘shared repertoires’ in collaborative cultural work that are unfamiliar to cultural practitioners ‘outside’ the collaboration?

Social capital

- How are new knowledge and skills ‘socially constructed’ in cultural collaborations?
- To what extent are ‘goodwill and trust’ defining characteristics of cultural collaborations?
- How is the ‘situated curriculum’ of the cultural collaboration defined and articulated?

Professional identity

- How does ‘participatory appropriation’ impact upon individual collaborators’ professional identities in collaborative cultural work?
- To what extent are existing professional identities ‘engaged’ or ‘suspended’ in cultural collaborations?

- Does the heterogeneity of cultural collaborations enable greater autonomy and innovation amongst individual professionals?

Tacit knowledge transfer

- Does the lateral constituency of cultural collaborations enable tacit knowledge sharing across 'multiple practices'?
- How is knowledge commodified in the cultural collaboration?

Leadership and governance

- How do governance and advocacy agendas influence cultural collaborations?
- How are leadership roles determined and actioned in collaborative cultural work?

Creativity and innovation

- What are the indicators of creativity and innovation in collaborative cultural work?
- What is the relationship between interaction, connectivity and creativity within the cultural collaboration?

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