



Learning in Communities

by Etienne Wenger and William Snyder

Is community-based learning part of your organization's plan for capturing all that the new economy has to offer? If not, do you know why it should be? To be a successful, high-performance organization in the new economy, your enterprise will not only need to embrace the vision of the learning organization; you will want to create and grow learning communities.

Etienne Wenger and William Snyder, two leading practitioners of communities of practice, enlighten us with their of community-based learning experience and explain through real-world examples how and why such approaches work. It's a helpful introduction to the topic and a good beginning for anyone designing a new-economy learning organization.

Most organizations fall short when they try to reinvent themselves as learning organizations. The typical approach to workplace learning often merely reflects traditional school models: classrooms, rote memorization, individual study, smart teacher-naïve student, etc. Though the "school model" is not without merit for some kinds of learning in some kinds of situations, it is dangerously limited if pursued as the be-all and end-all of workplace education. It fails to recognize one of the most natural of all learning processes, learning through interactions and relationships in networks of others who are experiencing and working on the same challenges and tasks. People learn in communities of other people working on the same things. They learn from other people, and consciously or unconsciously teach other members, through a matrix of relationships and social exchanges. They learn from situations that arise in those communities, and through the joint conversations, they engage in about problems to be solved.

The traditional school model labors under two assumptions that are flawed as a universal prescription for acquiring new knowledge. The first is that learning involves loading up people's brains with information, like gasoline into a car engine. The second assumption is that learning only takes place in the context of formal education events such as training classes or on-line teaching modules. These assumptions suggest that life just requires us to apply the information that has been formally poured into our heads.

Life, though, is not just application and today's knowledge worker is not just an engine in a car. Learning is an integral part of life itself, and the lessons come not only from individual experience, but from the experience of others, transmitted through relationships and networks of social interactions, and reinforced by a sense of membership in the group that affirms and guides what any participant knows. Learning is an often unseen, but nonetheless powerful byproduct—or in some cases driver of—a group's social life. Think how much you know through participation in various communities: your native language learned through membership in your family; the elements of sexuality acquired through playground discussions with adolescent peers; ways of working with customers through conversations, advice, and demonstrations from company colleagues. Likely such lessons were much more powerful than if you had been told to read about them in a book or sit through a class. In the new economy, learning architects are

embracing the natural designs of group learning experience and translating those designs to new organizational cultures and approaches.

Social Communities and the New Economy Organization

Many organizations are pursuing community-based learning as a complement to the more traditional approaches of knowledge transfer. They do so not through some new age embrace of "more human processes," but rather out of a practical realization that this kind of learning is required to deliver the results demanded by the higher performance imperatives of today's hypercompetition. Specific drivers of community-based learning include:

- the need for people to share knowledge across business units due to globalization and demands for coordination to achieve greater scale^{3/4} and the corresponding understanding that such sharing depends critically on social relationships.
- the growing recognition that the most valuable knowledge in an organization is "tacit" and not easily codified in documents or explained in a formal setting
- the increasing realization that most fields of expertise are now too complex for any one person to master and thus collective intelligence must be brought to bear to solve important problems.

Examples abound of community-based learning. In commercial or not-for-profit organizations, they typically appear as informal or semi-formal networks of practitioners with similar responsibilities in different geographical or functional domains or even across organizational boundaries (e.g., safety engineers in a manufacturing complex, Unix developers all working on a similar software problem, development economists in different organizations working on water supply issues, etc.).

A critical dimension of such communities is the shared practice of the members—people working with their hands, minds, and intuitions on the same discipline or set of problems. In fact, much of the discussion of community-based learning is in the context of so-called "communities of practice". The examples that follow help highlight how important shared practice is to the business value of these learning communities. Our experience with such leading organizations as DaimlerChrysler, the World Bank, Hewlett Packard, the Veterans Administration, McKinsey & Co., and IBM has reinforced for us the perennial truths of community-based learning among practitioners. Moreover, the practice communities of these enterprises have become, in all cases, either a central or very strong component of the overall learning-organization strategy. A more detailed look at one case, DaimlerChrysler, illustrates the power of good social design.

Communities of Practice

In 1989, DaimlerChrysler's Chrysler division shifted from a functional structure to a platform-based structure (defined by vehicle groups such as small car, large car, Jeep, minivan, and truck) in order to reduce cycle time and product-development costs. In making this shift, the division found that functional competence in component areas (chassis, electronics, body, and powertrain) was compromised by the new structure. In an effort to increase performance by reducing cycle time, the division unintentionally reduced functional competence in components because the change in organizational structure brought about a change in social context.

To avoid losing its functional competence under the new platform-based structure, the Chrysler division has developed communities of practice called "tech clubs." Tech clubs are organized to maintain deep expertise in specific functional areas across car platforms, such as brake design, seats, or windshield wipers. Members meet regularly to discuss questions in their product development areas. Clubs analyze variations in practice, set standards, and recommend vendor selections and specifications. Engineers who participate in the clubs are responsible for developing and maintaining an "Engineering Book of

Knowledge," a database that captures information on compliance standards, supplier specifications, and best practices. New engineers rely on attendance in tech club meetings as a means to get up to speed more quickly, to build a professional network, and generally to find their sense of identity as product-development engineers. These tech clubs differ from typical formal functional structures because community-nominated chairpersons lead them and much of their work is done on a voluntary basis. This combination of a car-platform structure and cross-cutting communities of practice has already cut product-development cycle time by half.

Communities of practice are groups of people who share expertise and passion about a topic and interact on an ongoing basis to further their learning in the domain. This includes engineers who design brakes, artists who congregate in a café to discuss a new style, nurses who gather at lunch and talk about their patients, gang members who need to know how to live on the street, or first-line managers commiserating about their delicate position between management and the front-line. Community of practice members typically solve problems, discuss insights, and share information. They talk about their lives, interests, and ambitions. They mentor and coach each other, make plans for community activities (meetings and conferences as well as social gatherings), and develop tools and frameworks that become part of the common knowledge of the community. Over time, these mutual interactions and relationships build up a shared body of knowledge and a sense of identity.

In examining the Chrysler division, and many organizations like it, we observe a number of trends:

1.

Communities are becoming more formally recognized and supported by their organizations. As companies become global, they depend on their abilities to apply their competencies more broadly than ever before.

2.

Communities have become the cornerstone for knowledge strategies in a growing number of organizations. Communities are the centerpiece of the World Bank's strategy to share knowledge among developing countries in all aspects of development. Specialists in urban services to the poor, for example, share their experience across continents to fulfill their commitment to eliminate urban slums.

3.

Communities are also expanding beyond the traditional organizational boundaries to include vendors, partners, and customers. These fluid business-alliance and partnership networks depend on new kinds of inter-organizational communities to develop the trust, foster the learning, and build the new practices these networks need to thrive. These inter-organizational communities, like communities inside companies, rely on internal leadership, shared passion, and ongoing relationships.

4.

E-commerce both generates and is influenced by learning communities. Most businesses think of e-commerce in terms of efficient transactions and new access to customers. The greatest potential of e-commerce, though, lies in moving from a strictly market view of customer relationships to an approach that treats customers as members of a learning community organized around a related set of products and services.

Communities of practice are valuable to learning organizations because they represent a completely new layer of organizational structure previously not addressed by traditional business units. Nevertheless,

communities also present an unfamiliar challenge for managers. They differ from traditional structures in several respects:

- You foster communities of practice; you don't create them. Nurturing healthy communities is more like tending a garden than building an engine—they thrive on the personal energies and relationships of members.
- You depend on members' passion for the topic that brings the community together. Passion drives people to share and advance their collective knowledge.
- You count on internal leaders and community organizers. Thought leaders develop new ideas and methods while organizers coordinate learning activities and initiatives in ways that satisfy both members' needs and stakeholder demands.
- You must learn to leverage the strategic role of communities in the knowledge economy. In this economy, the knowledge capital that communities steward is your most critical strategic asset. They develop and coordinate key competencies and enable you to focus formal structures on customers and processes.

A community-based approach must be part of any serious learning-organization strategy. The principles we outline represent a high-level roadmap to give a running start to anyone interested in unlocking the social capital of their organization. There is an urgent need to create a new set of management tools and methods for developing communities through their lifecycle, and for designing organizational environments that will enable communities to thrive. Look for more insights and deeper understanding about this critical form of learning to come forward in the future through the shared practice of those working together on this next frontier.

The best way to develop community-leadership expertise is to practice what the theory teaches and participate in communities about communities of practice. Such a community would include a toolkit that represents the best thinking and methods of participants from a variety of leading organizations. It would feature regular events, on-line resources and forums, workshops on advanced topics, and ongoing action research. We believe that such a learning system not only offers the best way to develop expertise in this area, but also models how future organizations will go about learning in areas critical to their competitive advantage.

Etienne Wenger and Bill Snyder are now organizing such a learning [consortium](#) on communities of practice. Consider this an invitation to join. To learn more, take a look at their [article](#) in the Harvard Business Review (with a conversation in their on-line [forum](#)) or their [website](#). You can reach Etienne Wenger directly at etienne@ewenger.com, Bill Snyder at wsnyder@socialcapital.com.

Copyright (c) 2000-2002 LiNE Zine