Communities of Practice and Learning in a Senior Living Environment

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Abstract: Adults participate in communities of practice (COP) in diverse environments. As the number of US citizens 55 years or older increases, so might the number residing in adult living environments. COP research would be valuable in such settings.

The United States (U.S.) Census Bureau, 2006-2008 American Community Survey measured the US population at 301,237,703 (2009). Of that, 18,210,745 (6.0%) were 55-59 years old and 70,662,158 (23.4%) were 55 years or older (2006-2008 ACS). Using the US Census 2000 Data, the US Administration on Aging (AOA) shows that the number of residents 65 years or older has increased steadily over the past century and grew from 3.1 million in 1990 to 35 million in 2000 (AOA 2000 Census Data, modified 2009). They estimate that in 2030, there will be 72.1 million residents 65 years or older (modified 2009). In 2008, 1.60 million (4.1%) residents 65 years or older lived in institutional settings such as nursing homes (Profile, 2010). An additional 2.4% lived in senior housing where at least one supportive service was available (Profile, 2010). Such settings offer rich ground for research in how learning occurs.

Learning is inherent in human nature, is ongoing and is an integral part of life (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) describes learning as the ability to negotiate new meanings that can transform one’s identity and ability to participate in the world by changing who one is, one’s practices, and one’s communities. Learning constitutes a trajectory of participation, as an individual begins and continues to learn, building personal histories in relation to histories of communities, and connects past and future in a process of individual and collective becoming. Learning also creates and bridges boundaries, as one’s identity consists of multiple memberships often requiring reconciliation. Learning is a matter of social energy and power that thrives on identification. It is also a matter of engagement that depends on opportunities to contribute to communities of practice (COP) that we value and by which we feel valued. Such opportunities may be found in senior living environments, where residents can share stories, know-how, street smarts, or other information not commonly known. This tacit knowledge, or the knowledge that people have but cannot tell (Polyanyi, 1967), provides context for how to understand experiences. This can be helpful for residents new to the environment or who need information about common life-stage concerns such as aging, elderly care, or supporting grandchildren.

As the number of older citizens in the US increases, it is possible that the number of adults residing in senior living environments will increase. From a social learning perspective in adult education, studying COP in these settings may contribute to understanding why adults, particularly older adults, participate in COP for personal development and knowledge sharing. The purpose of this paper is to show that senior living environments are ideal settings for COP and to consider how COP might form in such living situations. First, I will discuss learning as a social and inherent activity. Second, I will discuss the concept of communities of practice. Last, I will discuss how a community of practice can enhance learning for seniors.

Learning is Inherent and Social

Learning occurs individually and in groups as individuals actively engage new ideas, information, and behaviors and apply them in communities. Learning is a social activity,
(Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007); it’s the influences and experiences that gain, improve, or modify a learner's knowledge, skills, values, and worldviews. It occurs in four settings: formal (as in educational institutions), non-formal (typically short-term community-based learning), informal (everyday; spontaneous and unstructured; often tacit), and online (Merriam et al., 2007).

While studying different forms of apprenticeship, Lave and Wenger (1991) highlighted the importance of situated learning, which views learning as a process of social participation, more than just knowledge acquisition by individuals. They note that individuals join communities and learn at the periphery, moving toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of the community as they become more competent and involved in the enterprises of the community. People need to be full participants in the world and in generating meaning; newcomers should not learn from talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation, but should learn to talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

**Communities of Practice**

Etienne Wenger, a pioneer in studying the concept of community of practice (COP), describes COP as a social theory of learning:

Engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are. The primary unit of analysis is neither the individual nor social institutions but rather the informal 'communities of practice' that people form as they pursue shared enterprises over time (Wenger, 1998, p. 1).

COP members share goals and interests, engage in shared practices, and reflect values through a common discourse (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger (1998) discusses COP as the informal relations and understandings developed based on mutual engagement in joint enterprise and focuses on social identity, trajectories of participation (from newcomer to full member), and stresses that individuals encounter based on membership in different COP.

Research on COP tends to focus on professional development and knowledge management in business organizations and online communities, where the goals are often tangible and financial, such as increased profit or productivity. Studying COP based on personal development and knowledge sharing – as opposed to financial gain or promotion – can contribute to understanding why adults, particularly older adults, participate in COP.

Wenger (1998) describes three primary characteristics of COP. First is the domain, which brings the community together and gives it its identity. This implies commitment to the COP and a shared competence. If members do not interact and learn together, then they do not form a COP, even though they might have a lot in common, such as students who attend the same high school. On the other hand, COP can be informal, such as gangs or the Impressionists, who met to discuss their new style of painting. Second is the community, which is a group of people who share the domain and engage in relationships to address problems and share knowledge. Third is the practice, which creates a shared repertoire of knowledge, methods, tools, stories, and ways of responding to problems that members share and develop together. This shared practice requires time and interaction; members must be practitioners. Although COP members may value their collective competence, outsiders may not even recognize it. Developing a shared practice can result from intentional efforts, such as employees collecting and documenting common knowledge learned while on the job or unintentionally, perhaps through conversations during breaks. Both involve the creation of a set of stories that become a shared repertoire of knowledge for practice. COP exist everywhere and individuals belong to
multiple communities, such as families, schools, occupations, professional associations, garage bands, Alcoholics Anonymous, gangs, and churches.

Others have studied COP from a situated learning theory perspective. Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, and Clark (2006) note that situated learning theory accounts for individuals’ personal histories, experiences, and knowledge and that the norms of one COP may complement or conflict with the norms of another. For an individual to have a coherent sense of self, conflicts must be negotiated and reconciled, at least somewhat. It is important to understand what happens within and beyond COP. They explore COP from several perspectives, such as that of the individual learner and the broader socio-cultural context in which COP are embedded. Heaney (1995) states that learning is situated in relation to social practice as well as space and time: “Learning is an individual's ongoing negotiation with communities of practice, which ultimately gives definition to both self and that practice, whether it be in the context of training, literacy acquisition, community action, or graduate education” (p. 3).

COP has been studied from a business perspective. Brown and Duguid (1991) stress the role of COP in improvising new knowledge in groups formed in resistance to management, when canonical practices of work were not sufficient to complete required tasks. Brown and Duguid (1991) argue that in order to understand how information is constructed and travels in an organization, one must understand the communities within the organization and the distribution of power among communities. Wenger (2004) suggests that if a good model for managing knowledge is adopted, then its practice can give a company a decided advantage. He also states that, “if knowledge is a strategic asset, then it has to be managed like any critical organizational asset” (p. 1). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) forward the concept of COP as a management tool for managers, who should foster COP across organizational boundaries. Millen, Fontaine, and Muller (2002) state that management needs to understand why organizations should support healthy collaboration in COP. Worker groups, or COP, have common disciplinary backgrounds, work and tools, shared stories, contexts, and values (Introduction, para. 1). Vestal (2006) shares that many organizations have invested time and resources into designing and implementing COPs, in an attempt to connect people with similar issues and collect content that will improve business processes (para. 1).

In exploring 22 articles and books related to COP (2001), Imel found that learning that occurs in a community emphasizes the social as opposed to the individual and that learning is considered to be situated in the social context. She also found that theories focusing on the social nature of cognition and meaning are stressed over theories focusing on individual learning. Additionally, the process and content of learning are intertwined. Handley et al. (2006) discusses limitations of situated learning, noting that “the capacity of individuals to compartmentalize their identities and behaviors according to the community they were currently 'in' might be difficult to achieve, especially given a desire to maintain a coherent sense of self” (p. 650). An individual's attempts to adapt can lead to tension within the individual and instability within her or his communities of practice (Handley et al., 2006). Lave (1996) states that it is difficult to move from the periphery of a community of practice to full participation because “the processes by which we divide and sell labor, which are ubiquitous in our way of producing goods and services (including 'knowledge'), truncate both the movement from peripheral to full participation and the scope of knowledge skill” (p. 65). These processes may even separate identity from intended forms of knowledgeable practice.

Ambiguities in the terms “community” and “practice” make the concept of COP adaptable for different academic and practical purposes, but can be confusing, due to the various
conceptualizations of community, learning, power and change, and diversity and informality (Cox, 2005). Handley et al. (2006) agree that the terms “participation” and “practice” in COP literature are ambiguous and overlap in meaning.

Imel (2001) reviewed literature in adult education that raises concerns about learning in community. Structures for peripheral participation, such as workplace education and training, may keep learners on the edges of groups by reinforcing the dominance of older members over the aspirations of newcomers (Heaney, 1995). St. Clair (1998) addresses reasons why use of the term “community” can be confusing and suggests that it can be a useful analytical construct if viewed as a form of relationship between people, instead of a collection of things or people.

Communities of Practice for Seniors

In the United States, living to certain ages allows certain benefits, such as the ability to obtain a driver’s license and to legally consume alcohol in a bar. Benefits for older adults are received at various ages. According to the U.S. Social Security Administration, workers can retire between the age of 62 and full retirement age; however, benefits are reduced if collected before the full retirement age (Retirement Planner). AARP, a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization, helps people who are 50 years or older to improve the quality of their lives. Century Village is a senior living community for people 55 or older. Although much of the US Census Data refers to adults 65 years or older, I chose 55 as the age for this paper, as it is the youngest age for residency in Century Village. Laslett (1991) lays out stages of life in four eras. The first era is one of dependence, socialization, immaturity and education. The second era includes independence, maturity and responsibility, earning and saving. The third is an era of personal fulfillment, and the fourth brings final dependence, decrepitude and death. Seniors in which I am interested may participate in COP about personal fulfillment, dependence, and the last stages of ageing, as well as aspects from earlier stages that have carried over, such as caring for siblings, children and grandchildren.

Community organizations and coalitions address issues such as health and wellness in the senior community. One example is the Escalante Health Partnerships, which responds to the health needs to the community (Nuñez, Armbruster, Phillips, & Gale, 2003). Another example is the Tenderloin Senior Outreach Project (TSOP), an organization that attempts to foster social support and social action organizing to address the poor health, social isolation, and powerlessness often connected with low-income elderly residents of single room occupancy (SRO) hotels. These agencies work with older adults through community efforts, but are not COP formed by the community members themselves.

I chose to examine Century Village because of the rich living environment and options it offers to residents; there should be a variety of COP. Century Village is a renowned and unique active-adult, 55+, condominium community which in its promotional material offers an “unrivaled amenity-rich lifestyle at an affordable price” for 50,000 residents in 4 South Florida communities (Century Village, 2009). Each residential community offers a variety of activities: golf, swimming, tennis; exercise classes; clubhouses and clubs; computer classes; arts and crafts; billiards and ping pong; security; and transportation. Entertainers come for 200 Broadway-style shows per year. With over 30 years in existence, Century Village has had time to form COP, perhaps around education, employment, end-of-life issues, health, finances or raising grandchildren. With the space and opportunities provided, residents likely create informal groups where learning occurs, a repertoire of experiences, tools, tips, and stories are shared, and knowledge is practiced. Formal and structured learning opportunities, such as workshops and classes by experts to engage the members and help them make informed decisions can be
planned by the Century Village staff. Codified information may be posted, disseminated, and discussed. Informal learning would occur in the spontaneous conversations that occur without intent. The members themselves can be responsible for sharing their tacit knowledge. For example, perhaps someone knows of a specific AARP employee who has a wealth of information about local Medicare services or maybe a member knows of an organization where seniors can receive discount meals on weekends. Online learning would probably not be a primary learning setting, unless the COP focused on the Internet or technology. Century Village as a business may offer funding, support and other resources for these COP, but they would be created and maintained by the residents whose lives they enhance. The domain would differ according to interest and practice, but would include members of the residential community. New members would likely be residents new to Century Village or new to the specific COP. To different degrees, all members would share their knowledge, methods, experiences, tips, and stories to teach and learn from each other. They would spend time interacting and practicing the information gained and perhaps even document their knowledge. Successful COP would work to resolve potential conflicts regarding self-identity, new member socialization and minimization of conflicts between long-time members and newcomers. Senior COP would also need to find ways of addressing the death of members and how to maintain a sense of community.

Learning is social and inherent. In a senior living environment, where residents have vast stores of information, knowledge, and experiences, communities of practice offer great opportunities to share tacit knowledge. Research about COP in senior living environments should address how members come together to share knowledge, support lifelong learning, and discuss common concerns about ageing. Research should also address individuals’ abilities to integrate their multiple identities with minimal conflict. Ways to make the transition from periphery to full participation smoother and reduce tension between different levels of members is another area to study. Another area to study in such COP is how teaching occurs. For example, how much is formal or led by an expert? Are there scheduled classes or specific times when residents share knowledge? Finally, this study was conducted off-site; Century Village would be an excellent site for direct study.

References


