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Daniel Hooper, Kanda University of International Studies

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A Pilot Case Study of a Student Learning Community

Daniel Hooper, Kanda University of International Studies

Abstract

This short article summarizes a pilot study for an ongoing longitudinal case study into a student-managed language learning community within a university self-access center in Japan. Utilizing a communities of practice conceptual framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), this study is investigating the dynamics of the learning community and its place within a larger institutional and sociocultural setting. In addition, a key focus of this research is the process of community leadership socialization and succession that takes place over a two-year period. In this summary, the research aims, theoretical foundations, methodological approach, preliminary findings, and future directions of the study are all provided. Through detailed analysis of community dynamics, institutional support, and the leadership succession process, it is hoped that this research will provide insights that can help inform learning community support and guidance within self-access contexts.

Keywords: communities of practice, self-access, sociocultural theory, leadership succession

This is a summary of a recently completed pilot study for a larger two-year longitudinal case study of a student learning community (SLC) within a university self-access learning center (SALC). The learning community that this study centers on represents an interesting example of a student-managed learning community in which learners meet outside of regular classes in order to collaboratively develop their spoken English ability. As this community clearly exemplifies autonomous language learning, investigation into the practices of the community as a whole and its individual members could provide useful insights for self-access administrators and facilitators regarding the potential affordances and challenges that learning communities present.

Very little research to date has focused on learning communities within SALCs (Balçıkanlı, 2018; Kanai & Imamura, 2019; Murray & Fujishima, 2016; Watkins, forthcoming) and there has been increasing interest in self-access within higher education in Japan (Mynard, 2019). Consequently, detailed examination of the dynamics and history of a SLC could assist SALC administrators and staff in developing effective strategies to support and promote sustainable SLCs while ensuring the communities' autonomy is not encroached upon. Arguably, within higher education contexts, one pivotal issue related to the sustainability of SLCs is leadership succession. Due to the fact that most members have a

four-year “shelf life” as they will eventually graduate from the institution, the survival or dissolution of SLCs is hinged upon whether or not new generations of leaders are created to continue the stewardship of the communities. For this reason, this study specifically focuses on how active members of the community are socialized into core leadership roles and how they negotiate the transition.

Communities of Practice

The theoretical framework for this project is based on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) and Wenger’s (1998) work on communities of practice (CoPs). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) describe CoPs as “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” (p. 1). The theory underpinning CoPs has evolved considerably over the last three decades (Cox, 2005; Kimble, 2006), but one of the more persistent claims is that CoPs are defined by the presence of three key elements: the *domain*, *community*, and *practice*. The *domain* refers to the shared purpose or common goal of the members, the *community* is the interaction of members as they share knowledge and help each other, and *practice* relates to the resources, knowledge, and strategies that the group develops and maintains (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). A more prevalent focus in more recent CoP research (Wenger-Trayner, Fenton O’Creevy, Hutchinson, Kubiak, & Wenger-Trayner, 2014) is the role of community boundaries and the brokering practices that help to both negotiate tensions and facilitate learning between different CoPs.

Despite the theory behind CoPs being highly-cited and applied to a vast range of fields of inquiry (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016), the theory is not without its critics. Some of the most enduring criticism of the theory is based on insufficient consideration for the influence of larger issues of power on CoPs as well as a lack of focus on the individuals in CoPs and the unique histories and perspectives they bring with them (Billet, 2007; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004). This project hopes to build on the existing CoP research while attempting to address some of these criticisms from the literature.

Methods and Participants

In the pilot for this study, purposeful sampling was conducted via a questionnaire distributed to 13 members of the SLC. From that number, six members who consented to participate in the full study were selected based on the duration of their participation in the community (two community leaders, four regular community members). In addition to these

community participants, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the learning community coordinator in the SALC where the study was based due to their detailed knowledge of the community's historical development and their key role as an intermediary between the institution and the community. The study to date featured four distinct data sources – questionnaire data, language learning histories, semi-structured interviews, and community artifacts. In addition to informing participant sampling, the initial questionnaire data also provided information on learners' perceived purpose of membership of the community.

The selected six participants then carried out oral language learner histories (in English and/or Japanese) where they described their language learning experiences to date, as well as their future learning goals. The rationale behind including this data was that it provided detailed description of the unique and complex histories and beliefs that members bring into the community, which ultimately contribute to shaping it. Some critical voices have claimed that in some CoP-focused research, participants are often portrayed not as individuals, but simply as members of a broad group such as “insurance processors” or “language learners” (Billett, 2007; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004). By analyzing participants' language learning histories along with detailed interviews about their current experiences in the CoP, it is hoped that this study will be able to provide a richer description of the bidirectional way in which community influences individual and vice versa.

Two interview protocols (for core members and active members, respectively) for the semi-structured interviews were grounded in the domain, community, and practice elements of the CoP framework. The interviews were then transcribed and later analyzed through open-coding and typological analysis (Hatch, 2002) to identify any emergent themes from the data. Upon analysis of the language learning histories and interview data, validity checks were conducted by member-checking sessions with each participant. These sessions were also recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using open thematic coding and typological analysis based on the CoP framework.

Summary of Data

Although preliminary, this study has revealed the dynamic and multifaceted nature of this learning community and its members. In terms of *domain*, the primary purpose for attending the community appears to be to develop spoken English ability by discussing everyday topics. However, this stated purpose is also colored by a variety of other roles emerging from the community's history such as it being a place to socialize with other

internationally-oriented students and an accessible venue standing in contrast to a more intimidating English-only conversation area in the SALC.

In terms of *community*, this group of learners was found to have a distinct core group of three organizers who each had clearly defined roles related to how the community ran on a weekly basis and how they supported regular members. Several of the active members marked these organizers as potential role models both linguistically and in terms of their personalities. This core group, in turn, was being influenced to varying degrees by the advice and instruction of the previous leader who had utilized a strongly autonomy-supportive style of leadership. What superficially seemed like a fairly linear hierarchical relationship was made more complex by the beliefs of the previous and current community leaders, as well as the learning community coordinator. These individuals often problematized the hierarchical *senpai-kohai* (senior-junior) dynamic traditionally prevalent in Japanese institutions (Haghirian, 2010) as they felt, to varying degrees, that it impeded opportunities for free expression and learning.

The community's *practice* was manifested in a number of different forms. One of the more notable examples of tools/practices deployed over the history of the CoP in order to address its enduring challenges and concerns was the language policy. Early in the community's history, to maintain the community's accessibility, key CoP members decided that members should be given opportunities to draw on their L1 to scaffold their conversation in English. Many of the current members stated that being given time to plan out their utterances collaboratively in Japanese helped them to contribute more actively to English discussion and also led to a lower-pressure learning environment. At the same time these members also emphasized that L1 use should be principled and expressed concern about it bleeding into time reserved for English use.

Future Directions

Although the results from this pilot study have revealed a number of interesting avenues of inquiry related to this autonomous language learning SLC, there are a number of adjustments that I feel need to be made as I move into my full study. The first addition is that I am planning to incorporate participant observation as part of my methodology. As this study has progressed, I have become increasingly aware of the complexity of the community's practice and the diverse affordances and tensions that underpin it. Partially influenced by a previous research project investigating a social learning space that I was involved in (Mynard et al., in press), I came to understand the importance of viewing first-hand the behaviors

exhibited by participants within a learning space—essentially viewing *practice* from the sidelines. I will also be able to view this practice through the community’s Line group (an “artifact” created by the community in a social communication app) that I was invited to join recently by the community leaders. Finally, in order to further monitor members’ perspectives on the “health” of the community, once per semester I will also be utilizing an adapted version of the Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002), an established instrument for measuring perceptions of connectedness, sense of community, and learning. It is hoped that these additional data sources will allow me to triangulate my interview data and language learning histories as well as provide a deeper understanding of the SLC’s domain, community, and practice.

A further addition that I believe will be valuable in helping me to understand the situatedness of the community within the SALC and the institution at large is a greater focus on the perspectives of the SALC management towards the learning communities. I believe that the Learning Communities Coordinator and the community members all represent an entity within the larger institutional communities of practice of the SALC and the university as a whole. How these key organizational players manage conflicting interests and beliefs within the institution is key to the viability and continuation of SLCs in self-access settings and therefore deserves an increased focus within my study.

Notes on the contributor

Daniel Hooper has taught in Japan since 2006 and is currently a lecturer in the English Language Institute at Kanda University of International Studies. His research interests include English instruction in eikaiwa, teacher and learner identity, and learning communities.

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