

Leading and Managing Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs): A Contextual Understanding and Exploration

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Abstract

Increasing amount of work is performed today in geographically dispersed team settings that transcend the boundaries of time, space, culture, and territory. An in-depth comprehension of the complexities involved in leading and managing these communities of practice could not be greater. Any group of individuals meeting together for a common, well-defined purpose over a certain period of time, can be loosely defined as a “community of practice” (CoP); however, when the work is primarily carried out in cyberspace using computer mediated communication (CMC) and its attendant tools and accessories, we generally refer to such communities as “virtual communities of practice” (VCoPs). While the extant literature on networking technologies reveals a lot of research already conducted on the technographic profile, virtual experiences of community members, and the impact of technology on communication, it is relatively mute when it comes to an understanding of the emotional experiences of leading and managing VCoPs. This paper explores the various aspects of leading, facilitating, learning, and participating in virtual or asynchronous platforms with a special emphasis on the intersection of “virtuality” and “emotion.”

Keywords: *Virtuality, VCoPs, CoPs, swift trust, e-learning, virtual leaders, virtual learners*

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Asynchronous communication has been adopted in almost all organizational and learning platforms following the use of Internet for commercial purposes in the 1990s. From a leader and facilitator perspective, comprehension of the dynamic nuances of virtual communication and practice becomes necessary. Colleges and universities have integrated online teaching platforms parallel to on-ground classroom facilitation to improve student retention, create flexibility for adult learners, as well as provide access to international or remote students.

Professional organizations may also be found incorporating virtual interactive training modules to train new hires for cost effective measures. This paper provides an overview of communities of practice (CoPs) and virtual communities of practice (VCoPs), a reflexive mapping of role-facilitation between leaders as virtual facilitators and the emotional and learning receptivity of the students or participants in an asynchronous environment.

Defining Communities of Practice: Overview

Wenger (1998), one of the earliest researchers of CoPs began writing about them nearly two decades ago as the Internet started to play an increasingly active role in communication, newsgroups, and information dissemination by electronic means.

Communities of practice are everywhere. We all belong to them-at work, at school, at home, in our hobbies. Some have a name, some don't. We are core members of some and we belong to others

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more peripherally. You may be a member of a band, or you may just come to rehearsals to hang around with the group. You may lead a group of consultants who specialize in telecommunication strategies, or you may just stay in touch to keep informed about developments in the field. Or you may have just joined a community and are still trying to find your place in it. Members of a community are informally bound by what they do together, from engaging in lunchtime discussions to solving difficult problem and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities. A community of practice is thus different from a community of interest or a geographical community, neither of which implies a shared practice.” (Wenger, 1998)

Wenger’s description illuminates a critical aspect of CoPs, i.e., “members of a community are informally bound by what they do together.” While there may be CoPs that formally come into existence at the behest of an organizational directive where employees are given no choice but to join the group, these communities do not necessarily grow, flourish, and do productive work because of directive leadership. On the contrary, research indicates negative impact of active hands-on leadership, despite evidence of an initial spurt in community development during early stages, because of some direction by a leader (Gilmore & Warren, 2007).

What are the consequences of introducing “virtuality” when members are expected to meet, interact, and work in cyberspace? What anxieties are triggered in the leader(s) and followers? How are these anxieties managed and/or metabolized in the pursuit of work, and what challenges and threats must community members expect in such unfamiliar territory, which may feel impersonal, detached, and even devoid of human emotion?

Leading and communicating in cyberspace can often trigger very complex emotions, a sense of paranoia, and a unique kind of “disembodied” relatedness; all

of which a leader must understand to be effective (Civin, 2000). Providing a “holding environment” (Winnicott, 1971) can be challenging in an amorphous setting such as the Internet; however, without a transitional space, community members will not feel nurtured and held. There is always an inherent danger that a very directive, hands-on leader may unwittingly create a dependency group, which followers often respond to by taking a counter-dependent stance. How does a leader create a safe environment (transitional space) that facilitates learning and growth in the group?

There is some debate in the academic community, whether “leading” and “teaching” in the virtual setting are synonymous. Leaders make the mistake of assuming they are at the head of the pack, and feel responsible for getting people from point A to point B (a tactical function typically within a manager’s domain). Their bosses, using this yardstick, often measure their effectiveness as leaders. What does getting a learner from point A to point B mean to a leader?

An important distinction between the functions of leading and managing in the context of VCoPs is pertinent. The latter function is relegated to overseeing technology, ensuring its smooth functioning and reliability, meeting deadlines etc. Leading involves all other functions that serve to facilitate learning within the community; leading and managing are complementary, yet uniquely different in their foci. Fineman (2003) suggests that virtuality reorganizes feeling within the environment of the workplace.

Let us examine other aspects of leading VCoPs, by looking at the experiences of two co-leaders (teacher researchers), (Gilmore and Warren (2007) at an institution of higher learning in UK. An attempt is made here to draw parallels between their experiences and those of other leaders who run contemporary business organizations that

have been charged with leading and managing “e-learning portals.” Their study is chosen as a backdrop because it explicitly uses a combination of “ethnography” (participant observation) and “grounded theory” (generating theory as part of social research) to make sense of data.

Gilmore and Warren, Senior Lecturers at Portsmouth Business School in UK are both experienced educators; however, during this project, their practical understanding of the virtual medium was limited to email and asynchronous communication such as bulletin boards, newsgroups etc. All work was carried out in real-time through synchronous chats, using a widely used e-learning platform known as WebCT (now acquired by Blackboard Inc.).

The objectives of the study were two-fold (Gilmore & Warren, 2007, p-582):

1. To explore the nature of the educators’ emotional responses to online teaching.
2. To prompt further consideration as to how virtuality transforms many of the face-to-face interpersonal means by which feeling is formed and expressed in a virtual setting, and by extension, to the physical workplace as well.

The two researchers from the University of Portsmouth Business School divided their study into four sections; however, given the scope of this paper, we will focus more on those areas of their research findings that support and elaborate the ideas that we are working on.

1. Leaders’ anxieties often emerge because of the intersection of virtuality and emotion. These anxieties are different from those that we see in face-to-face settings.
2. VCoP leaders must be able to facilitate the development of “swift trust” in an amorphous medium such as the Internet. Without trust, the

community cannot accomplish its explicit and implied objectives.

3. Leaders must have the capacity to use their own feelings and emotions in the service of e-learning/teaching.

An interesting observation made by the two researchers from UK is that prior to launching the VCoP, the extent of the training and initiation they received at the University had more to do with the technological aspects of the WebCT platform (a largely management function related to technology), how to structure the look and feel of the virtual room, roles and responsibilities of students, how to locate and work with online resources, and other logistics that would convince one of the sterile nature of the medium. There was little or no mention of the facilitation challenges around emotionality, especially as they pertain to the virtual medium. Both researchers came away from the training classes, feeling that the medium was being essentially presented and promoted as though it were an extension of their current teaching experiences in a physical classroom. So, there was already some skepticism in their minds around what leading a VCoP would entail.

According to Coppolla et al (2000), “this computer-mediated communication channel remains impoverished with respect to emotional expression. The affective role required online tutors to find new tools to express emotion, yet they found the relationship with students more intimate (Coppolla et al., 2002: 178, 186). The expression of emotions in virtual settings has been a recurring topic of debate over the years, yet a discourse around the dynamics of emotions is relatively absent when it comes to online learning and teaching in VCoPs.

To paraphrase Gurak (2004), emotion was a significant area of Internet research in the late 1980s to the mid-1990s; one that still has importance

as technologies facilitate more sophisticated interaction between increasingly diverse sections of the world's population. There may be several reasons for the omission of emotions from the discourse; however, two that readily come to mind are the seeming discomfort around discussing emotions (one's own and others'), and the mistaken perception that VCoPs are but an extension of physical settings and therefore warrant no additional training other than a technology overview. This can pose a serious challenge to nascent leaders who may naively believe that leading a VCoP is no different than leading a face-to-face team.

The two researchers Gilmore and Warren facilitated the VCoPs over a 12-week timeframe, with "real-time" biweekly seminars that lasted for 50 minutes. Each seminar was themed around a different sub topic under an overall module entitled "Virtual Society and its Implications for Business Activity and Institutional Organizations." The participants were not geographically dispersed distance learners, but enrolled at the University. The goal was not to enable participation using virtuality, but as "part of an andragogic strategy to enable students to experience what it was like to interact purposefully using a virtual medium." (Gilmore and Warren, 2007, p-588). Each researcher led 12 of the total 24 sessions and the ethnographic component of the exercise involved individually and collectively recalling the emotional experiences, during and immediately after each session. This was conducted via email and face-to-face conversations.

Given the research design's subjective experience component and the overall purpose of the study, a real-life experience of the researchers could only be had by completely immersing themselves in the role of participant observer. As Willis (2009:9) notes, an ethnographic approach requires what he describes as a sense of the "poetry of experience" in that researchers often need to pay attention to data which

are "metaphorical, indirect, and atmospheric [rather than] literal or rational" (2000:9). Both Gilmore and Warren reported to each other, a heightened sense of emotionality (a different experience from their traditional role as teachers in a physical classroom) as they began leading the seminars.

Drawing on both psychoanalytical and social constructivist accounts of emotion, the researchers admit to the possibility of a blurring of boundaries between the actions of students in the seminars and their own emotional reactions as leaders (a composite exchange) that can sometimes give the semblance of a very mixed bag. Three important categories of emotionality, namely intimacy, play, and pride/shame were specifically conceptualized by the researchers, using a social constructivist perspective.

Intimacy/Disinhibition Effect: As we move work from the traditional face-to-face settings to VCoPs, the absence of paralinguistic cues (such as intonation, gestures, and facial expressions etc) and the removal of socio-spatial indicators (such as seating, subtle hierarchical differences between leaders and followers) give rise to a need for mental reorganization, to make sense of how to act and behave in a VCoP where communication is typically text-driven, as opposed to verbal. The familiar ways of constructing emotion now must give way to something quite challenging for most leaders and followers who choose to work in VCoPs. To further compound matters, the "disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004, p-1) can be a very troubling phenomenon to nascent leaders. Here is how Suler describes it:

It is well known that people do things in cyberspace that they would not ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, and express themselves more openly. Researchers call this the 'disinhibition effect.' It is a double-edged sword. Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal

secret emotions, fears, and wishes. Or they show unusual acts of kindness and generosity that we may call ‘benign disinhibition.’ On the other hand, this effect may not be so benign. Out spills rude language and harsh criticism, anger, hatred, even threats. Or people explore the dark underworld of the Internet, places of pornography and violence, places they would never visit in the real world. We might call this ‘toxic disinhibition’ (Suler, 2004, p-1).

It is precisely this “disinhibition effect” unconsciously experienced by participants in cyberspace that may also contribute to a great deal of intimacy. The “disembodied” nature of relationships does not suggest that the body actually disappears in cyberspace, but that it is reconfigured and mentally reconstructed in order to find new and unique ways of relating and expressing online.

While it is generally agreed that the democratic nature of VCoPs may in fact be because of the absence of paralinguistic cues and socio-spatial indicators which contribute to a diminution of status and authority, it would be wrong to assume that these groups can be leaderless. Leaders play a pivotal role in creating a holding environment (Winnicott), even if it means they must become a screen for others’ projections and fantasies. The skill lies in being there invisibly. The researchers reported a growing sense of intimacy and closeness to the students, possibly because the students were more forthcoming and candid. They were more casual, less guarded and formal, and more willing to engage in intellectual discourse. With the reduction of the power/authority differential between leaders and followers in VCoPs, learning and sharing are enhanced.

Play/holding environment/swift trust: There is a well-known correlation between “play and creativity” which often results in freer expression, more trust, and perhaps even complex thought.

Not only did the researchers have to modify their own roles as leaders, but also quickly establish a safe environment (potential space) that would be conducive to learning and sharing. “Potential space” is an expression borrowed from Winnicott’s theory and talks about a hypothetical area of mutual creativity between an infant and the mother (Moore and Fine, 2000). This idea has been extrapolated to concepts such as virtual space, theatrical illusion, liminality, and the suspension of disbelief, negative capability, and objective correlation. In the words of the researchers:

“The online seminars allowed us to see the messiness of learning-our own as well as that of the students as well as the open-ended character of this process, its fragmented nature as well as the ‘eureka moments.’ Therefore, one of the most salient outcomes of the experience was the recognition of the tutor’s affective role-a crucial aspect of which is the creation and maintenance of a potential space” (Gilmore and Warren, 2007).

The creation of the potential space by the leader may in fact contribute to trust building which is yet another important aspect of working virtually. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) wrote a seminal paper entitled “Communication and Trust in Global Virtual Teams” at a time when new applications were being sought to harness technology for geographically dispersed work teams worldwide. They introduced the seminal notion of “swift trust” which has increasingly found its way in contemporary literature on temporary virtual teams. While swift trust would be of greatest relevance in hastily formed “temporary teams and networks” such as cockpit crews, task force, sports teams etc., it is nonetheless very relevant to VCoPs as well.

In psychoanalytic parlance, when individuals feel more nurtured and held, their tendency to fragment, split, and act out in groups is greatly reduced. Consequently, they are then able to invest

more psychic energy into work. Paraphrasing the researchers, there was a playful dimension in the virtual seminars that contributed to intimacy and trust, in addition to the capacity of engaging in complex thought, possibly because of the absence of paralinguistic cues and freedom of expression without the accompanying embarrassment that one might be wrong.

Pride and shame: One of the most critical pieces of the study has to do with the complexity of feelings and emotions generated in the researchers (countertransference) as a direct consequence of undertaking for the first time, a project to lead VCoPs. That experience of pride and joy around the accomplishment when mixed with shame at their previous assessment of the students' abilities (as it related to the face-to-face setting), produced a paradoxical interchange which called into question their entire notion of teaching and higher learning. In face-to-face settings the true potential of group members is sometimes obscured because of their reluctance to speak up for fear of embarrassment around potentially being wrong.

Research data suggest that the students felt more intellectually stimulated because of the erosion of the body that often-produced feelings of embarrassment in traditional face-to-face seminar settings. It should also be kept in mind that the spontaneity and freedom of expression expressed by the students, which in turn produced a sense of pride in the researchers, might have to do with the reduced hierarchy in a VCoP as opposed to a traditional classroom. This of course warrants more research, for if the engagement and participation rules would likewise be modified in a traditional classroom, would students feel as enthused to participate as they did in the VCoPs?

Conclusion

In summary, when it comes to VCoPs, "teaching"

and "leading" seem to share many commonalities. The key aspect that makes "virtuality" so different from face-to-face settings is the absence of paralinguistic cues and socio-spatial boundaries, which in itself produces a very unique experience that simply cannot be replicated elsewhere. And for that reason alone, leading a VCoP as though it were similar to a face-to-face setting, would be a grave mistake.

As the hierarchy between leaders and followers is reduced or eliminated in virtual settings, a reorganization and renegotiation of the reasonable and customary rules and feelings needs to take place, to make room for a new experience. VCoP leaders must unlearn many of the behaviors and practices that otherwise seem quite effective in face-to-face settings. Leaders will need to be more mindful and tolerant when they are confronted with behavioral interactions that they would not expect in face-to-face settings. The permissiveness, disinhibition, and the lax nature of a VCoP can be quite disconcerting to a highly directive, hands-on leader who is used to an authoritative style of leading.

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