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Etiquette, Empathy and Trust in Communities of Practice: Stepping-Stones to Social Capital[1]

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Abstract: Creating online communities of practice involves much more than creating software. Software houses online communities of practice activities but social interactions also depend on who is involved, what their goals are, their personalities and the community's norms and policies. By paying attention to these sociability issues, community members can influence how their community develops. Norms that lead to good online etiquette, empathy and trust between community members provide stepping-stones for social capital development.

Keywords: Tacit knowledge, explicit knowledge, social norms, trust, etiquette, social capital, communities of practice, online communities, sociability
Categories: A.1, H.5, I.7

1 Introduction

A community of practice (COP) is a group of people who come together to learn from each other by sharing knowledge and experiences about the activities in which they are engaged [Wen 98, Wen 01]. Individuals, the community and organizations can all benefit from this process. Individuals get answers to questions but they also get much more; they get support, reassurance, insights, and exposure to different value systems and beliefs. Both explicit and tacit knowledge are exchanged. The way this happens depends on the social norms of behavior that individuals' expect and the collective norms of the community [Mor, 03, Pos, Spe, Lea, 00]. Whether an individual's norms or the community's norms prevail in setting the tone will in turn depend on whether the community has existed long enough for social norms to develop and, or whether there are explicit norms stated in policies that detail the kind of behavior that is expected in the community. Communities can vary considerably. Jokes that poke fun at another person may be seen as playful in one community and mean and disrespectful in another.

Communities of practice can be physically located, locally networked (e.g., within a company via an Intranet), virtual (i.e., networked across distance) or, as often happens, a combination of these. Originally the term COP was used widely to include almost any community that came together to discuss a specified topic; they included business, education, health communities and others. Typically the term is now

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associated with professional, work-oriented groups that may be associated with or a professional organization, a company or government agencies. However, effective Communities of Practice rarely develop when hierarchical relationships exist between members [Sny, Sou, 03].

The growth of the Internet and the World Wide Web during the last ten years has spawned many online communities of all types including online CoPs. In the next section I consider the nature of online CoPs in more detail and then discuss the benefits of developing sound etiquette online in order to create stepping stones to trust and social capital development. This discussion paves the way for considering how COP members, developers and managers can facilitate etiquette and social capital development within the community. Finally I present some elements of a framework for etiquette and social capital development and suggest an agenda for future research.

2 Communities of Practice (CoPs) and knowledge

Communities of Practice focus on a domain of knowledge [Sny, Sou, 03, Wen 98, Wen 01]. As the community develops its members share expertise, often by telling stories [Pru, 01], and support by interacting to solve or help solve problems. Gradually shared solutions and insights emerge that contribute to a common store of knowledge that accumulates over time. This may be facilitated by and held externally in data bases, frequently asked questions (FAQs), or it may become 'common knowledge' within the community, or it may be held in the minds of long-term members.

CoPs, like children, ecological systems, neighborhoods or any other organic entity, evolve and change over time. People join, others leave, and new foci of interest emerge that change the CoP's character. Typically new communities focus their energy on getting started (e.g., gaining members, specifying policies), whereas established communities with well-understood norms are more concerned with domain-related issues.

Ideally CoP's develop shared communal resources, such as routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, and styles of doing things, that help create a sense of community that socially binds members. Policies and norms of behavior facilitate establishing shared goals and expectations. Members' personalities, how they present themselves and their roles within the community determine their identities, the character of the CoP, and its boundaries.

Trust, empathy [Pre 99] and reciprocity are the building blocks for relationships that unite members. They provide conduits for the knowledge exchange and learning needed to solve problems and achieve shared goals. This knowledge takes two forms: explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge consists of facts and actions that can be expressed formally in grammars and databases. Tacit knowledge is harder to define. Tacit knowledge consists of beliefs, opinions, sensibilities, styles of doing things, and lore that maybe expressed in stories and anecdotes, a glance, a nod, body language or go unsaid. Some definitions of tacit knowledge stress more subconscious elements such as bias, prejudice, unstated assumptions and attitudes that are even harder to define.

Until recently knowledge management was primarily concerned with explicit knowledge; particularly in the western world where the scientific paradigm of thought dominates. However, using evidence from almost two-dozen companies [Non, Tak 95] pointed out fundamental differences in attitudes between American and Japanese executives. While many people from the West tended to put their faith in explicit knowledge, relying on formal unambiguous, systematic, scientific knowledge, Japanese executives, were more inclined to value tacit knowledge, which took the form of body language, sensibilities, and intuitions. This type of knowledge was often ambiguous, difficult to interpret scientifically and could not easily be reduced to formal grammars and records in a database.

More recently companies are recognizing the benefits of tacit knowledge for developing supportive relationships across teams, departments and companies. Furthermore, companies are seeing that these relationships generate new ideas, increased efficiency, and happier employees, which in turn translate into competitive advantage and increased revenue.

CoP's support both types of knowledge exchange but they have a special role in tacit knowledge exchange. Story telling, anecdotes, impromptu comments and opinions occur naturally in many CoPs [Pru 01]. The rigors of schedules and the structure of hierarchical relationships that tend to limit informal communication in many work environments are less prominent in CoPs in which the ties between people tend to be weak and there is little or no hierarchy.

Scientists and engineers are used to working with explicit knowledge but productively harnessing tacit knowledge is more challenging. However, since tacit knowledge is distinctly social and so is learning [Vyg 86], social processes that generate tacit knowledge may also support learning. In fact, tacit knowledge can also be helpful in understanding explicit knowledge. Metaphors and analogies are well-known vehicles for helping learners to understand new concepts in terms of things that they already know about. Indeed, one reason why stories tend to be powerful is that they generally combine the use of metaphors with personal and social information [Pru 01]. This combination can also motivate and inspire.

Using some of these ideas, Nonaka and Takeuchi suggest that the following types of knowledge conversion occur in generating new knowledge [Non, Tak 95]:

- Tacit knowledge generates new tacit knowledge by a process of socialization in which people chat with each other.
- Explicit knowledge generates new explicit knowledge by a process of combination.
- Tacit knowledge generates new explicit knowledge by a process of externalization, which I interpret to mean: if conversation partners externalize their understanding during their discussions, together they may formalize our tacit knowledge.
- Explicit knowledge generates new tacit knowledge by a process of internalization, which I interpret to mean: if we explain our explicit knowledge to others using metaphors and analogies, we will produce meaningful tacit knowledge.

Furthermore, Nonaka and Takeuchi suggest that metaphors and analogies help to facilitate some of these translations [Non, Tak 95].

Understanding the relationship between tacit and explicit knowledge and how they can be converted one to another is an important research challenge for CoP and knowledge management researchers. There are many tools for processing and retrieving explicit knowledge but powerful tools for eliciting, interpreting and retrieving tacit knowledge are needed. Contextual inquiry techniques used in human computer interaction [Hol, Bey 96] may provide a basis for this work, and some researchers and practitioners advocate story-telling [Pru 01]. However, these approaches tend to rely heavily on human experts, which can make them cumbersome and slow online. In addition more research is needed to examine the social potential of tacit knowledge exchange in CoPs. How do CoP's develop social capital and how does it contribute to the overall functioning of organizations?

3 Social Capital

Social capital is the glue that holds a community together; it is the shared knowledge, understanding, skills and offers of help needed to achieve shared goals, or help someone solve a problem [Put 00]. Unlike financial capital, social capital is usually not tangible and it is hard to measure. Consequently the concept is frequently not well understood and its power may be under valued. Communities that are rich in social capital tend to communicate well, their members spend time together, they help each other, and members contribute to the collective common good. For example members expect to offer help in return for receiving help from others. In other words, they expect to reciprocate for acts of kindness either by paying back directly to the person who helped them, or helping someone else in the group or by contributing to the community as a whole – a concept known as generalized reciprocity.

Unfortunately many physical as well as online communities experience too little social capital. In America, and probably in other parts of the world, social capital has declined steadily since the 1960s [Put 00]. Sociologist, Robert Putnam claims that without social capital communities are less safe and happy. A leading question is, therefore, how can CoPs develop the social capital needed to ensure that online CoPs and their physical counterparts function successfully?

Two types of social capital can be identified: *bonding* social capital provides the glue between members of a community; and *bridging* social capital enables communities to reach out to each other. Shared goals, norms and shared values facilitate bonding social capital development. Whereas, shared artifacts may be most important for bridging social capital. For example, a document produced by one community is passed to another. Such artifacts are known as boundary objects because they help to bridge the boundaries between communities [Wen 98].

Lesser and Storck [Les, Sto 01] argue that the social capital resident in CoPs leads to behavioral changes which in turn lead to business advantage. From a study of seven CoPs Lesser and Storck identified four specific outcomes that relate to dimensions of social capital. These dimensions include: connections between people who may or may not be co-located; relationships that build a sense of trust and mutual obligation; and a common language and context that is shared by community

members. In these respects CoPs are like an engine for developing social capital. As a result of meeting, sharing knowledge and support via CoPs the companies reported: faster delivery time, better and faster responses to customers, greater reuse of existing knowledge and software, increased innovation, and better links and relations with customers. In addition, and perhaps most interesting of all, these researchers report that CoPs contributed to reducing the learning curve among their employees. What might be the mechanism for achieving such gains? How is tacit knowledge exchange through informal social communication related to social capital development?

4 Trust, Responsibility, Reciprocity

Much is known about developing online communities [Pre 00]. For example, we know that identity, an important attribute for successful interaction, is challenged online, particularly in textual environments. When entering textual environments, people leave their bodies (and body-language) behind, which can severely hamper common ground development. Empathy and trust are also affected [Pre 99]. However the role of empathy and trust is complex because sometimes they develop too easily - a phenomenon known as a hyper-personalization [Wal 96]. Hyperpersonal responses occur when one person reaches out to another person online offering friendship and promises of support, which the other needy person accepts without questioning or knowing the person. A type of artificial closeness develops that often ends with the first person irresponsibly disappearing without trace. Several remedies have been suggested. Mimicking real-life with immersive environments in which each person has their own avatar which is easily identified by others. This works well in gaming environments where attractive, high-resolution graphics are expected and taken for granted. However, graphical representations like these are not often found in patient support and many other types of communities. In the trade-off between the need for a high-speed Internet connection and the easy accessibility of textual communications systems, the latter tends to win for patient support. Also, it is debatable whether high-resolution graphics provide an advantage to users. Some communities use photographs or encourage members to provide links to their home pages, or 2-D graphical representations. Furthermore, many participants are happy with textual login names providing the names are meaningful, identifiable and community members consistently use the same one.

Trust relies on believing that a person will behave reasonably and will do what he or she says. Feelings of empathy with another person may also come into play. The more we empathize the more we feel that the other person is like us and therefore we trust them [Lev, Reu, 92] and because of hyper-emotional development empathic communication can be very strong online [Pre, 99]. Work by [Axe 84] identified three conditions that encourage reciprocity: (i) if there is a strong chance of meeting the person again, (ii) if the person can be identified; and (iii) if the person's past behavior is known.

Software developers have developed ways of rating vendors' trustworthiness. Most of these systems require purchasers to rate the services and products that they purchase. E-bay provides a system for purchasers to rate the service they experience from vendors. Amazon invites readers to rate and comment upon books. Both systems

calculate scores that are then made public. For example, Amazon displays each reviewer's rating of a book, the average rating score that the book received from all reviewers, and how useful readers rate the review. The Linux community acknowledges its top contributors by naming them. Indeed some commentators suggest that the Linux community is strong because of the high degree of participation and reciprocity, and the pride the community members have in their accomplishments. Slashdot has a system in which moderators rate members comments and the moderators themselves are also rated.

In each of the examples the community rates information about performance and the result is made public. In keeping with Axelrod's theory, this information provides the basis for predicting what to expect in the future experience, which encourages trust. As Prusak commented "… *reliability* is a good first cousin, if not a sibling, to trust [Pru 01]. But could such systems work in online CoPs?

5 Norms, Etiquette and Policies

Lack of etiquette weakens sociability and even destroys communities or practice. For some etiquette is not just *nice* to have, it is *necessary*. Different types of technology require different forms of etiquette [Marx, 94]. A short abrupt comment is expected in instant messaging but it may be interpreted differently in email. Emotional affordances, syntax and semantics also vary across technology and new technologies may challenge previously accepted norms. With such a wide range of communications software now available to users etiquette is challenged when users move from one type to another. It's particularly easy to forget more subtle differences between the technologies.

Norms are the widely accepted ways of behaving that reflect the attitudes and values of a community of practice [Mor, 03; Pos, Spe, Lea, 00]. Most norms, including rules of etiquette, are learned through experience in a community. For example, children observe how adults and other children behave, absorb these norms, and learn their community's etiquette at an early age. This role-modeling process continues throughout life. Other community members correct those who do not conform to expectations. Problems arise when people go into other cultures with different norms, particularly when the differences are subtle.

Gift giving is an example of an etiquette norm. If I receive a gift from British friends, I open it, thank them and comment enthusiastically to show my pleasure. In Japan, this would not be polite behavior. To conform with Japanese expectations I would instead thank the person and carefully put my gift aside to be opened later. Opening the gift in front of my Japanese friends would not be polite and would contravene an etiquette norm of Japanese society. In each culture and community, norms preserve or enforce comfort and empathy in the community. Consequently, when norms of etiquette are broken, discomfort, confusion, annoyance, embarrassment and even fear may ensue.

A problem for communities of practice, particularly newly formed ones, is how to identify and establish acceptable, stable norms because without them empathy and trust are threatened. Several approaches can be adopted. A few basic, but strongly upheld policies by moderators, help to set standards of communication and can

prevent aggression online. Mentoring and role models also seem helpful, especially as we know that norms develop off-line by watching and imitating what others too. Unfortunately, these approaches are sometimes regarded as too labor intensive, particularly in busy communities of practice in which members have many demands on their time. Automated filters can identify and remove obvious obscenities and aggressive comments but human participation is needed to add that all important "human-touch", particularly in online textual environments.

6 Conclusions

CoP developers and managers often do not know exactly what makes some online communities thrive while others flounder or become digital ghost towns. Contrary to much popular opinion software does not equate with community. Software provides only a place where community happens when *people* come together for a *purpose* guided by *policies* that help to shape their online behavior [Pre 00].

Community developers can ensure that new COPs get off to a good start by working with and involving the participants of the new community. If the developers are themselves part of the COP this will be easier than if they are not because there will be more opportunity to involve members of the community. Involving members of the community is a good way of learning about the needs and aspirations of participants. A variety of techniques are available for this purpose, including contextual inquiry and ethnographic approaches.

A clear, short statement of purpose and a well-chosen name, prominently displayed on the community's home page and repeated on other applications, signals the community's intentions and can contribute positively towards success. For many communities this is one of the most important design features. Deciding on policies that will guide the community during its early development is tricky and a minimalist approach that acts as a scaffold on which the community can develop its own norms of behavior, which happens as participants get to know each other. A feature of many successful communities is that they not only develop norms, these norms become so strong that the community becomes self-governing [Pre 00].

The changes that occur as communities of practice grow and evolve can be summarized as:

- People start to think and act as a community rather than only as individuals.
- Individuals' goals and aspirations are subsumed in the community's goals.
- Policies that guided the young community are replaced or supplemented by norms and some CoPs become self-governing.

The extent to which these transformations occur depends on many factors. Some of which can be influenced by the developers but others depend on the participants' personalities and fate. Communities also go through different stages as they evolve and mature [Wen 01].

It takes time for social capital to develop because social capital depends on empathy and trust, which develop as participants get to know each other by working and learning together and interacting socially. As this happens people exchange

information, support and favors and develop a sense of responsibility towards each other and the CoP [Gon, Riz 01]. Norms of etiquette help to provide boundaries within which acceptable behavior occurs. Early on policies may be needed to set these limits but as the community matures standards of etiquette become embedded in the communities character. Of course, there can be strong differences between communities. Some may accept a more raucous style of debate, which would be unacceptable in others. The important goal is that standards are clear and consistent so that trust develops.

Knowledge – the main commodity of most CoPs – appears to impact social capital development in interesting ways. Knowledge has two roles: it is a community good (i.e., social capital) and it is also a facilitator for developing social capital - tacit knowledge particularly has this role. As communities develop and people, purposes and policies are transformed into community, communal goals and norms, knowledge, empathy and trust contribute both to that transformation and to social capital development.

More research is needed to understand the relationships indicated in the figure. However, we know from practice and other research that community developers, managers and community leaders can contribute to the evolving community, and ultimately social capital development, by: understanding people's needs; representing the community's purpose clearly; putting minimalist policies in place that can be changed as norms develop; supporting knowledge creation, exchange and storage; supporting communication and socialization online; encouraging empathy by enabling participants to recognize each other and their similarities; supporting trust by ensuring that identity is revealed and past behavior is tracked.

To understand social capital development we need to learn more about tacit knowledge and how technology can support social interactions involving tacit knowledge.

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