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Bridging Two Worlds: Identity Transition in a University Consulting Community.of
Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to use the concept of communities of practice to describe the process of professional learning in a student-run consulting group. The central thesis put forward is that communities of practice within educational settings can act as intermediary zones between university and professional settings, providing students with opportunities to learn social and professional norms that would be difficult to acquire in traditional classroom settings. Drawing on theories of theories of ritual and identity in organizations (e.g. Trice and Beyer, 1993; Pratt, 2000), the chapter examines a student-run consulting practice that draws on university support and professorial expertise, but whose managerial processes are centered around a self-selected group of students that is best described as a community of practice. It is argued that this student group, through various means of socialization and competency development, constructs a space in-between institutionalized fields that eases the transition between educational and work settings.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Higher Education, Organizational Learning, Identity, Socialization, Career Development, Student Groups

Bridging Two Worlds: Professional Transition in a University Consulting Community

The Community of Practice (CoP) perspective to learning has emerged in recent years as a significant contrast to more traditional psychology based approaches in the educational literature (Fox, 2000). The CoP perspective, emerging from the sociological and social constructionist literatures (e.g. Huber, 1996), has attempted to challenge the individualist tendencies of psychological approaches to learning by placing learning processes at the group or organizational level (Easterby-Smith, 1997). This has enabled novel discussions in education by opening up a new field of phenomena, group and organizational practices, as a legitimate basis for study.

This chapter is an attempt to enrich our understanding of CoP's as well as higher educational practices by describing a student-led CoP in an institution of higher education. Through a description of the symbolic and ceremonial processes that take place in this organization as well as the meaning-making and sharing dynamics that underlie these process (e.g. Thompson, 2005), I hope to show how this organization provided a clear value-added educational opportunity that would have been impossible to replicate in traditional classroom settings. The chapter will also attempt to show how group-practice oriented learning led in this setting not only to greater knowledge of major-related subject matter, but also to a greater identification with the occupations being learned and, ironically, a learning rather than performance-focused orientation that promoted intrinsic motivation for the community members (e.g Stevens & Gist, 1997).

The rest of the paper will unfold as follows. First, I will provide an academic overview of the CoP literature, showing how CoPs are relevant to how students learn novel professional identities. I will then connect this literature to a discussion of rites and rituals in organizations, arguing that CoP's can provide a ritualistic framing of social norms that explains the identity effects above, and that while the rituals literature is

highly relevant to CoPs, it has only slightly begun to be tapped to increase our understanding of how CoPs function. After describing the site of study and methods used, I will connect the above ideas to the concrete case of a student consulting organization, showing how initiation and apprenticeship rites within the CoP helped students refashion their identities into those of management professionals. The paper will end with a discussion of the CoP perspective in the light of these points, and show what we gain by adopting this perspective.

Conceptual Background

Overview of CoPs

The CoP perspective is rooted in Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on social learning theory, in which they attempted to decenter the learning process from independent individual cognitive processes to group and socially situated learning. In this view, the meanings and beliefs held by individuals are created through participation in communities of like minded members with similar interests. While the exact scope and definition of CoPs are largely left open by Lave and Wenger (Fox, 2000), the main ideas of social construction of beliefs, situated learning of concepts, and education as becoming increasingly central to a social group were the defining themes that characterized the CoP movement.

The CoP perspective offered an improvement in several important ways over existing ways of conceptualizing education. First, by understanding the educational process as part of an individual's membership in a community, the CoP perspective provides a richer view of the social ramifications of education. In addition, because most learning in an individual's life occurs outside of the classroom, that is, in work and other practice-oriented environments (Fox, 2000), paying more attention to the situated elements of learning through practice provides a pedagogical model that is descriptively

accurate. Finally, following from the previous point, a practice-oriented perspective allows an in-depth explanation for the effectiveness of such things as apprenticeship and mentoring programs, as will be discussed further in the paper.

Once we have established, however, that CoPs are an important tool for learning within educational and other institutions, it yet remains to clarify the *kinds* of learning that CoPs uniquely promote over other educational methods. Within the context of this chapter, the key insight will be that CoPs provide a context in which to learn role-specific professional identities that, over and above particular technical knowledge, facilitate the transition of students to professional work settings.

Group identities in practice

Over the last 20 years, a huge body of literature developed that stressed the significance of identity and identification of participants within social groups. The concept of identity was closely associated with commitment (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996). Group identification was linked to increased effort and motivation (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994), loyalty to the group (Adler & Adler, 1988; Pratt, 2000), and was described as a “driving force” behind organizational effectiveness (Rousseau, 1998, p. 217) and a “necessary condition” for group effectiveness (Scott, 1997, p. 98). Several studies also highlighted identity as an important new paradigm in the social sciences (e.g. Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000), affecting how we view organizational change and adaptation (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000), inter-group relations (Scott & Lane, 2000), and diversity (Brickson, 2000). The effects of identity were also shown to be enduring among students after completion of their educational careers, with high identifying students more likely to contribute to their schools in the future (Mael & Ashforth, 1992)

It may not seem obvious at first that practice is an identity-crafting process. However, once practice is envisioned as a social activity, then the previous point about social identity provides a bridge between the concept of practice-oriented learning and the crucial development of a professional identity. In Lave and Wenger's (1991) perspective, identity and group learning both occur as a function of the same participative act (Thompson, 2005). In the words of Hung and Chen (2002):

“The basic idea of enculturation is that through participation in an activity within a community, people's behavior or identity change, and in the process, become prepared to engage in subsequent similar activities. By engaging in an activity, participating in its meanings, people necessarily make ongoing contributions, whether in direct actions or in contributing to understand the actions and ideas of others. Hence, participation is in itself the process of appropriation of meanings and thus learning *to be*.” (p 248, italics in original)

Thus, because individual actions encode meanings that are relevant to how people view themselves, identities are closely linked to practices. Pratt (2000) clearly describes this process in his qualitative study of new organizational recruits. Recruits were trained through active engagement in group activities, which served to 1.) remove them from earlier role identities, devaluing these identities as being “stuck” in the status quo, and 2.) institute new identities which were framed as “chasing one's dreams”. This 2 step process relied on the active use of ritual practices. I will now discuss briefly how ritual can help us make sense of such a process.

Social learning, ritual, and socialization

Although the idea of “practice” is currently in vogue, the notion that learning occurs through socially mediated action has long roots in the sociology and anthropology literatures. Although the study of rituals goes back to the work of Durkheim (1961), it

was Van Gennep (1960), in his groundbreaking, *The Rites of Passage*, that began to view modern societies as heavily influenced by ritual. Van Gennep stressed that rites of passage do not only occur in primitive societies, but are universal, and that the ways these rituals work is uniform across different societies. In addition, he stress that ritual behaviors are not simply ways to maintain consensus among individuals, but are primarily important as a pedagogical tool, that is, to teach new ways of being and to transition individuals across social roles.

According to this theory, individuals passed through various “life crises”. These include birth, the movement from childhood to adulthood, marriage, and selection into a profession. We might add, in educational settings, entering a school as well as graduation, forming a social group, passing qualifying exams, etc. These crises, because of their role anxiety and importance to the social group, tend to be surrounded by social rituals, to mark the end of one life period and the transition to the next. Thus a “rite of passage” was composed of a pre-liminal phase, in which the individual is removed from his/her previous role, a transitional, or liminal, phase, in which he/she resides between roles and is temporarily devoid of a socially accepted identity, and a post-liminal phase, in which he/she is incorporated into the new role. This structure closely echoes Pratt’s (2000) study cited above. Fundamentally, Van Gennep argued, the function of this ritual framing of transitions was to restore security to members and equilibrium to the social group in the face of an ever-changing environment.

Since groups of common interest are often based around a shared world view containing systems of common, unquestioned assumptions and meanings (e.g. Smircich, 1983; Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983) we could see rituals as discrete events that function by establishing such meanings within specific groups. Smircich and Stubbart describe this challenge as one “to create and maintain systems of shared meanings that facilitate

organizational action (p. 724)”, but a CoP perspective to pedagogy might invert this logic, seeing action as a way to create and maintain meanings. Berg (1985) emphasizes such a view by describing individual experience as a flow of chaotic information, which has to be organized by groups through designating points of reference. These points function to break the flow of experience into digestible segments. A graduation ceremony may provide such a reference point for experience, which henceforth becomes classified as pre-and-post graduation. A final exam may to a lesser extent serve as a reference around which to plan the semester. These key points in the academic schedule recopy the notion of life crises, and hint at how group activities can be strategically used to codify experience and establish identities of students.

It should now be clearer how CoPs can be effectively used to help individuals transition across role identities, using ideas from the literature on rituals. Individuals within a higher educational setting are often faced with uncertain or competing identities, having spent many years as students yet knowing that they will have to face an unknown professional world with a distinct set of roles and expectations. Simply teaching professional skills within that educational setting is inadequate to prepare them for this challenge, because while such an approach may present relevant information, it reasserts the student role through the very form of classroom learning. On the other hand, throwing students into a professional setting, through, for example, an internship program, does not provide students with the “liminal” period in which they can provide closure to their old worldviews and experiment with new “professional” identities.

In this way, a CoP approach within a higher education setting can provide an effective transition to professional life on two counts. First, students engaging in practice-oriented rather than classroom-oriented pedagogy can accustom themselves to professional norms of proactivity, accountability, and initiative. Second, by orienting

this practice within a group setting, students can act as role models to each other, learning from other students' struggles and accomplishments. The peer groups that may have been central to student's lives are thus retained, and their peer role models remain present but in professional garb.

In the following section, I will attempt to describe a program in which these ideas were realized within an undergraduate setting. The CoP in question is a student-run management consulting group, run by upper-level students. I will demonstrate how group-based rituals were used to separate individuals from their student identities, re-cast these students into "consultants", and prepare them for a business career.

Site and Data Collection

The results described below came from a qualitative study of an undergraduate, student-run consulting group, which I will refer to with the pseudonym "ConsultingJunior". The organization was part of a relatively young business school in Brazil, and was one of several "Junior" consulting groups that had emerged in top national universities in recent years, although it was not affiliated with any of these other groups. The term "junior" was used to describe these groups because they were organized and run completely by students, who were responsible for funding, procurement of services, marketing, selection, and similar organizational functions. While, as will be described below, professors and other university departments were used in support roles, such support was always student initiated, and the relationship between outside support and ConsultingJunior was always one of third-party contracting, with students retaining final say over the organization's activities.

ConsultingJunior was a non-profit association composed of 23 students, and structured around a three-level hierarchy, with novice recruits filling "consultant positions", while older students composed a directorate which was headed by an elected

president. From the interviews, it became evident that, informally, the principal hierarchical division was two-fold, between the consultants and the directorate, with the president essentially melding in with the rest of the directors. This structure set up the strong mentoring and apprenticeship focus which will be described below.

The stated objectives of the organization were as follows. First, ConsultingJunior was a self-conscious attempt by the school to bridge the theoretical knowledge gained by students in the classroom with practical, hands on experiences dealing with clients in the local economy. A corrolary to this mission involved training the students in specific managerial functions such as finance, marketing, or human resources, functions which, it was believed, can only be learned in an environment of practice. Second, the mission involved developing critical and analytic skills through having to deal with exigent clients, as well as entrepreneurship skills in having to procure clients and come up with innovative ways of handing client needs. Third, the organization had as an objective the strengthening of relationships between local businesses and the business school, with ConsultingJunior providing a basis for further collaboration between these business and the university community. Specifically, the benefit to students in interacting with these business was to provide an edge in recruitment to these students who would before long face the job market. Third, ConsultingJunior had a strong social service component, where small and medium sized enterprises could receive consulting advice from a center of higher education at prices well below the market standard. In the context of Brazil, this was seen as a socially valuable function within a developing market economy, and played a strong part in ConsultingJunior's identity as a non-profit organization. Finally, the organization served as a marketing tool for the school, publicising its best students locally and spreading the name of the school.

The data used in this study were collected by a variety of qualitative methods. Both formal, structured interviews and informal talks took place with the students involved in the organization, at every level of the hierarchy, including the president, directors, and new recruits. Written materials and pamphlets describing the organization were collected from the organization, as well as classroom materials used in the school that pertained to ConsultingJunior. All materials were collected in Portuguese, and translated by the author.

Results

Rituals of Initiation

Initiation into ConsultingJunior followed in many ways the idea of life crisis elaborated upon earlier. Before entering ConsultingJunior, students had spent their lives within educational institutions, with the norms that structure experience and interaction within these institutions. However, at the current life stage of ConsultingJunior recruits, many students expressed anxiety about facing an entirely different insitutional structure, the capitalist marketplace with unknown and mysterious norms and rules. From a life crisis perspective, ConsultingJunior provided a transitional space in which these new norms could be experiemented with, and students could develop their own individual styles of integration within the managerial world. What was unique about placing this transitional space within an institute of higher education was that it provided these possibilities in an environment that was focused on education rather than efficiency, enabling students to comfortably try out new ways of acting without the incessant pressure of high productivity.

The first step in crafting a professional identity at ConsultingJunior was an in depth recruitment and selection processes, oriented toward differentiating the organization as professional and meritocratic, an important reputation to establish not

only because it distinguished the organization from more informal student groups, but also because, within a Latin American context, because it attempted to reflect “newer” values of global capitalist economy, such as transparency and good governance.

The selection process thus involved an independent and autonomous selection agency that was hired by ConsultingJunior to run “dynamics” with potential recruits. These dynamics essentially were comprised of group activities in which individuals were judged on their interpersonal skills and competencies. After an initial cut, a smaller group of students was interviewed, and from that group, the final members were chosen to begin during the university holiday period. The absence of classes during the initial weeks at ConsultingJunior was critical, because it allowed for complete devotion from the new members, and physical and temporal separation from their former identities as students. Following Pratt’s (2000) study of newcomer socialization, this “divestiture” of old identities is a common socialization technique and is crucial to creating a psychological space or void which a new identity can fill.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of apprenticeship is central to the CoP perspective, and constitutes one of the main contributions of this literature. The apprentice idea was clearly manifest in ConsultingJunior’s philosophy and practices. For example, the initiation of newcomers involved what was termed a “knowledge management” component. Knowledge management consisted of older student consultants who were leaving the organization interacting with the new group. During seminars that were held, these older students (“masters” or “old-timers” in Lave and Wenger’s terminology) were responsible for transferring knowledge gained during their tenure to the new recruits. This ritual was seen both as a pedagogical experience for new members, and a way to preserve the culture of the organization, thus combining social structure with learning in a way best explained through a CoP lens.

A second way in which the apprenticeship idea was reflected in the consulting practice was through the “outsourcing” of professional resources from the university community. Projects used professors in the university to help draft and to sign off on projects, ensuring legitimacy for the student run works while providing the opportunity for practical interaction with academics in the field. In addition, students would work together with administrative divisions (e.g. human resources) in order to formulate their own projects, drawing on the wider university community to consolidate and justify their own practices, modelling these practices on established functions within the university system.

A significant part of the ConsultingJunior experience that many students mentioned in their interviews was the “first contact” with prospective clients. New recruits were expected to make professional presentations for clients “outside the space” of the consulting office, travelling to businesses around the city to present the consulting services. This act of initiation was experienced by students as traumatic and stressful, but also as exhilarating. The idea of first contact closely follows the logic of Van Gennep’s rites of passage, as it forms an act through which a members forge new social identities.

The first contact idea can also be closely paralleled with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) idea of “legitimate peripheral participation”. According to this idea, newcomers to a CoP, while remaining peripheral to the core of the social group, engage in symbolic actions that contribute to the work group. Through these actions, they move closer to the center of the group. By combining Lave and Wenger’s notion of movement to the center with the ritual literature’s emphasis on single, identity-transforming actions, we can see how a single “first contact” can provide a bridge into a new identity through community membership.

“Becoming Serious”

Once the students within Consulting Junior had passed their selection, knowledge management and first contact rites, they were on the road to what one interviewee termed “becoming serious”. This involved integrating many of the core values of the CoP, including responsibility, commitment and initiative. On the one hand, the organization attempted to teach members about their respective business functions, such as marketing, human resources, or project management. Many of the students claimed that what they wanted to do with their professional careers was strongly influenced by their functional roles at ConsultingJunior. On the other hand, from the interviews it became apparent that most learning involved learning how to *be* a professional, regardless of specific field. For some students, membership in Consulting Junior was their first chance to “opinar”, or to hold and demonstrate their opinions to others.

A second and related part of becoming serious was creating an in-group identity with the CoP that saw the organization as a central, unique and distinctive part of the lives of the students involved (Albert & Whetten, 1985). One way this was achieved was through the use of social symbols such as professional dress, which was required of students working at junior, even outside of work hours. Some students perceived this exigency as overly controlling, while others stressed the importance of this policy, as a constant reminder of the students’ new identities. In the classroom, many CoP members tended to use ConsultingJunior examples in their assignments and class comments, and to work with other ConsultingJunior members in group projects when possible.

This creation of an identity bond between ConsultingJunior members led them to differentiate themselves from outsiders, a classical identity effect (e.g. Tajfel&Turner, 1986). As one student put it, “[ConsultingJunior members] are not just like anyone from the street”. This identification also led them to choose referent groups for self-

comparison based on their identities. For example, rather than measure their abilities by comparing themselves to other students at the university, members tended to compare themselves to Junior consulting groups at *other* universities, highlighting the practices of other similar groups as models for their own behavior. In this way, not only their own CoP, but *communities* of CoPs became loci of modeling and learning processes.

The above observations should not be taken to mean, however, that the ConsultingJunior learning community was not without problems. While the purpose of the community was to aid students in transitioning from student to professional roles, this transition sometimes led to a sentiment of artificiality among participants, particularly those new to the organizations. Following Pratt's (2000) treatment of member socialization, those who have trouble buying into the values of the community are likely to see it as more of a system of indoctrination than as a center of excellence. For example, some interviewees complained about "faking it" during business meeting, or "not wanting to show insecurity" and thus pretending to conform to ideals when they really didn't not believe in those ideals. In the words of one interviewee, "Sometimes we think we are more than we really are".

This difficulty in dealing with dual identities sometimes also led to conflict between members of ConsultingJunior and their friends outside and inside the organizations. For members who had to dress professionally and act according to professional business norms, for example, such behaviour threatened to alienate them from their former social groups within the university community. In addition, when friends were also members of the group, it was sometimes difficult to know when to use the established friendship interactions that students were used to, or to adopt new norms and not "let things interfere" with the consulting practice. One student described this as

separating the “profile” from the “person”, perhaps an important lesson in itself within the business world, but also a negation of the principle of identification and deep participation inherent in the CoP idea. An important question to ask is under what conditions a CoP can effectively transition a person from one identity to another, and when a CoP simply pastes a superficial identity onto existing ways of being that resist change.

Implications and Discussion

One of the main contributions of this chapter is to demonstrate that ritual processes in groups are closely linked with both skill formation and the acquisition of occupational identities in individuals (Islam & Zyphur, 2005). While a long history of studies in the sociology and anthropology literatures has demonstrated the link between ceremonies and rituals and the institutionalization of social structures (e.g. Van Gennep, 1960, Turner, 1969), here the focus shifts to group and individual cognition. Indeed, one of the main thrusts of the CoP Literature has been to move social structures from the idea of “black boxes” to looking at actual interactive patterns between people (Thompson, 2005). This paper shows how one such pattern is the enactment of tasks that represent “typical” occupational routines, and the ritualistic framing of those tasks in terms of “being practical”.

An important conceptual point to take away from this observation is that CoP based educational methods do not in any way run counter to the intrinsic, learning focused approaches that some psychologists have championed (e.g. Stevens & Gist, 1997). Rather than thinking of practice in this case as opposed or antithetical to theoretical learning, the CoP idea stress that concept formation is intrinsically itself a social act, built up through the communicative practices of individuals with similar goals and interests.

In this way, the CoP idea provides a bridge between the long separated spheres of theory and practice in educational thought.

In the case of ConsultingJunior, the student-run nature of the learning environment was key to the modeling and identity formation process that occurred there. It is difficult to imagine similar levels of commitment and identity, for example, if the organization had been run top-down by professors or university administrators. Instead, the feeling by students that they were “on their own” led to strong attempts to succeed in the absence of faculty assurances of success. In the words of Wegner and Snyder (2000) “In general, we have found that managers cannot mandate communities of practice. Instead, successful managers bring the right people together, provide an infrastructure in which communities can thrive, and measure the communities’ value in non-traditional ways.” (p 140).

In an educational context, this idea translates into formulating opportunities for student-run groups that can autonomously create their own learning environment in a bottom-up, organic fashion. It means finding ways that such groups can draw on the intellectual and experiential support of the administration, while drawing on the intrinsic motivations and creativity of their members to maintain their learning environment.

Finally, this chapter attempts to argue that while a CoP can be understood in terms of the cognitive effects such a community has on its members, it can also be understood in terms of its placement within a “macro” institutional context. Perhaps the most important observation about the CoP studied in this chapter is the fact that it was sandwiched between two large, identity-defining institutional contexts, that of the school and that of the workplace. I have argued that the CoP’s placement at this critical point in students’ lives is not random, but rather is strategically necessary for the CoP to perform its function. We learned from the rituals literature that life crises reflect complex

transformations and changing expectations that people have to make sense of. These crises demand social processes that shape peoples' views in systematic ways. A CoP, in addition to demonstrating skills and knowledge for its members, can be understood as playing a key role in this larger picture, as a tool to re-calibrate the identities of people looking for new ways of being.

In sum, this chapter has presented an example of how CoPs can be used effectively within educational settings. The insights contained here are all based on an over-arching idea, central to the CoP perspective: that student learning does not simply involve learning facts, but also learning how to do things with those facts, and ultimately, how to become part of society through one's knowledgeable practice. The CoP perspective thus provides a link between education settings and social action, contributing in an important way to education's ultimate goal of creating fully participating members of a community.

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