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Community of Practice for New Associates in the Commercial Real Estate Industry

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## Abstract

A commercial real estate company, Cassidy & Pinkard Colliers, prides itself on providing their clients service that is attentive and tailored to their needs. Despite the depressing state of the market, the organization is expanding and even merging with other branches around the country. One way to ensure the company's client service philosophy is not lost in the challenging whirlwinds is to continue to provide consistent superior client service. New associates face a challenging financial climate and there is no consistent or standard method of training. It is essential that during the expansion, a consistent training method is put into place to ensure the organization can continue to meet business and philosophy goals, as well as ensuring the success of their future brokers. Implementing a Community of Practice is sure to meet the needs of the organization and the new associates.

Constructivism is an epistemology which is founded in the belief that knowledge is discovered through genuine experiences. Constructivists have moved far away from traditional learning theories to change the world's view on learning and education. Lakoff describes, traditional learning paradigms at the foundation view the world as a “completely and correctly structured in the terms of entities, properties and relations (1987, as cited in Duffy & Cunningham, 1992, p. 2). In contrast, constructivists argue that “meaning is imposed on the world by us, rather than existing in the world independently of us” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1992, p. 3).

Constructivist learning systems are centered around the learner as opposed to the learner being placed into an existing system. Constructivist theories are based on the principal that the world exists because of our interpretations and experiences in it, therefore instruction and learning is focused on the learner's construction of meaning, not extracting it from their surroundings. “Instruction, we believe, should not focus on transmitting plans to the learner but rather on developing the skill of the learner to construct (and reconstruct) plans in response to situational demands and opportunities” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1992, p. 5). The instructional priority is to provide support for the learner to make sense of their surroundings, as opposed to confirming reality for them.

A commercial real estate organization is complex in its operational nature; there are magnitudes of different avenues brokers can pursue in the commercial industry each, of them a challenge. In addition, brokers face challenges on various levels including the financial market, client relationship and retention, and internal organization challenges, all of which are constrained by the pressures of time and money.

Cassidy & Pinkard Colliers is a reputable commercial real estate company that operates various commercial real estate services, including commercial brokerage services for tenants and landlords. The vast majority of new associates are not familiar with commercial real estate operations; they require training for the industry standards, internal standards and organizational assimilation.

A Community of Practice Learning System (COPLS) is an exceptional example of a constructivist learning environment that is suited to meet the challenges facing a new associate in a commercial real estate firm. COPLS are rooted in situated cognition learning theory. The Instructional Design Knowledge Base (IDKB) describes situated learning as an appropriate method for less formal research styled learning approaches and is adaptable to various “disciplines and objectives that relates social, behavioral/psychological and neural perspectives of knowledge and action” (Clancey, 1997, p. 343). Situated cognitive environments allow the users to interact with others socially through cognitive tasks in an authentic and real-world atmosphere. Furthermore, as users participate in a situated learning environment, they are engaged in manner that is almost informal and unintentional. With proper scaffolding and coaching methods, a COPLS not only provides the tools for learning, but a real-world like platform to launch their knowledge into an authentic application.

A Community of Practice is a virtual space built for interaction between novice learners, instructors and other experts. Here, knowledge is constructed in an authentic environment that is continually transforming not only in the characteristics of its meanings, but all of the participants are also transformed as they exchange ideas, opinions and even data.

New associates require a learning environment that is adaptable to their learning goals as well as considerate of the amount of time they are able to contribute. Time is a valuable commodity which must be spent moving in a direction the learners (associates and brokers) deem conducive to making money. It is also essential that the learning environment be realistic, applicable and relevant. The knowledge they construct must be real-time and pertinent to their learning goals in the short and long term. Duffy & Jonassen explain the importance of real-worldness with relation to the context.

"We are not simply talking about critical and incidental attributes of the environment. We also argue that the reason for solving the problem must be authentic to the context in which the learning is to be applied. Thus, we do not have learning and performance objectives that are internal to the content domain (e.g., apply the principal), but rather we search for the authentic tasks and let the more specific objectives be realized as they are appropriate to that task" (p. 26).

It is essential to this learning environment that the participants, primarily the learners have control over the direction. As they guide the interactions the context of the COPLS will become rich with relevant knowledge. As an instructional designer, the goal is to provide a medium and facilitate effective learning techniques to encourage participation. Dabbagh and Ritland emphasize that by providing a "resource-rich" learning environment, and guiding the participants through scaffolding, the learners are able to actively construct a reality (Dabbagh & Ritland, 2005, p. 169).

To facilitate the most effective learning environment for the new associates, it is essential that a wealth of resources are available. The type of resources will vary in nature depending on the objective of course. Some resources will be hypertext media, but another valuable resource will be the availability of subject matter experts. This could include more experienced and seasoned brokers, but it will also include experts in other areas of commercial real estate such as property management.

Subject matter experts serve as a resource for research for the new brokers; furthermore they will also play an essential role in the context development of the community. These members will have an active role in the development of problem solving skills. These experts can provide unique insight and share their past experiences. In addition, they will be a key player in developing case studies as it will be their experiences with challenges that will be used in the studies.

Although commercial real estate can be a personal, face-to-face business, at least traditionally speaking, this will not be an encumbrance on the applicability of what knowledge and skills the brokers attain. The context of information and data exchanged

between the members are real-time and real-world challenges. Duffy and Jonassen elaborate:

An essential concept in the constructivist view is that the information cannot be remembered as independent, abstract entities. Learning always takes place in a context and the context forms an inexorable link with the knowledge embedded within it. Most simply stated, an abstract, simplified environment (school learning) is not just quantitatively different from the real-world environment but is also qualitatively different. The reason that so much of what is learned in school fails to transfer to nonschool environments or even from one subject matter to another is due, in part to the fact that the school context is so different from the nonschool environment (p. 26).

Although most business deals are made in a face-to-face manner, the associates will lose no value in relevancy or authenticity of the knowledge being developed online.

The new associates will have access to case studies on the website; they can review and share ideas on the cases. This will help them develop problem solving skills. As the new associates explore, they will also have the opportunity to ask questions for challenges they may face, which have been unaddressed. Perhaps they are in search of some insight or a different perspective regarding a particular issue. On the COPLS, they can gain insight from their peers and colleagues or even collaborate to solve the problem. Collaboration is an important skill to learn as brokers frequently work together for brokerage deals.

Communities of practice are unique in that they are capable of having an influence on all of the participants, including the instructional designer. This emulates the characteristic of real-world experience; COPLS are social systems that are alive with exchanges and constant adaptation. This attribute is advantageous to adapt to new and different learners outside the new associates learning group. It is not uncommon for various departments to collaborate on projects, in fact, it is one of the goals of the company to integrate different services and provide their clients with full commercial real estate services. This helps the both the client and the real estate company maintain consistency and it strengthens not only the reputation of the company but also the services it can provide.

It may be far reaching in the beginning for the designer to create a COPLS for all new members of the commercial real estate community. It's more realistic to start with new associates and the community will shape and grow through interactions. As membership grows, diverse perspectives throughout various departments and areas of interest will grow as well. Therefore, the community will naturally develop into a context rich environment for non-broker members. However, it is important for the instructional designer to provide research resources and continue to facilitate and "coach" the community.

It is easy to see how a Community of Practice Learning System can integrate beautifully with the learning needs and demanding schedule of the new associates. The knowledge gained by participating is important as it gives them insight not only to the climate of the real estate market, but also valuable insight to diverse challenges they will likely face in the real estate career. Most importantly, their prior exposure to these challenges will prepare them to make educated decisions to resolve problems and overcome challenges.

## References

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