

Running Head: RESEARCH & SCHOLARSHIP IN EDUCATION

A Description, Analysis, and Synthesis of How Communities of Practice Influence Research &
Scholarship in Education

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Introduction

Over the course of the semester, students in the Research in Scholarship and Education class read articles and received lectures from many different faculty members of the George Mason University College of Education and Human Development. While their research areas varied amongst the specialties of the school, there was a common theme in how each of them engaged their Communities of Practice to accomplish their research goals. Communities of Practice will be defined as people working together to share knowledge and collaborate with each other in ways of advancing in the field (St. Clair, 2008). This paper will discuss the articles and lectures of three faculty presentations and analyze them in terms of how their research fits with the Community of Practice concept. This paper will conclude with a reflective self-analysis from the author in terms of Communities of Practice.

Comment [j1]: A clear and focused introduction , which should guide your ideas in the following sections.

Description

Dr. Mastropieri presented her study on developing writing strategies for students with emotional and behavioral disorders in a public school setting. The study used a design procedure where the strategy was reviewed and adapted to the students' needs as the study progressed until the team determined that the strategy was effective (Mastropieri, Scruggs, Cuenca-Sanchez, Irby, Mills, & Mason). Dr. Mastropieri conducted the study in collaboration with a team at Penn State who were also running the same study in their area. GMU conducted the research within a public school setting. The teacher was not implementing the strategies at a fast enough rate so Dr. Mastropieri and her team convinced the teacher to allow them to begin teaching the writing classes. Conducting this study required collaboration amongst the GMU

research team, with the public school to include the staff and the students, and with the team at Penn State.

Dr. Ndura provided articles she had published that focused on diversity and multicultural education. Her lecture told the story of her life and discussed some of the tribal conflicts within Burundi. She talked about the education she received which came from a French perspective and was outside of the context of her native land (Ndura, E.). As she progressed in her education she became involved with different communities in both secondary and higher education. In addition to the research she was doing at the university level she became involved in a project to improve the education system in Burundi. This involved her working with a variety of different agencies to include the minister of education in Burundi. She observed classrooms in the American education system and identified what was effective. The minister of education from Burundi then came and observed those classrooms with her so that the teaching strategies could be emulated in Burundi. In addition, she worked towards raising funds to help improve the school buildings and purchase supplies. Throughout her entire life, Dr. Ndura has faced many obstacles and she has persevered to arrive at the position she is in today. Her research deals with multicultural education and she has been involved in many different communities to include her tribe, her university, the American Department of Education, her foundation, the minister of education from Burundi and those she is working with in Burundi to improve their schools.

Dr. Penny Earley provided a paper on a group of women who had formed a community to discuss professional issues over dinner. These women had come to realize that they each needed support and in some cases were unable to receive the same training as men. One of the stories in the paper was of a woman who was doing a surgical residency. She was unable to finish the postsurgical debriefing because the men in the group would continue their

conversation into the locker room where she was not allowed. She felt at a disadvantage because she was not being allowed access to a community of learners. The group of women having dinner together formed a supportive group to help each other with professional issues. Eventually the original members left but other members flowed through. The group had served its purpose for the original members but eventually they no longer needed the group (Applegate, Earley, & Tarule, J. M.). Dr. Earley provided a lecture on her work in education policy. She told her story of working at a lobbying firm and getting her education. The article was analogous with much of what she had to say in that her lobbying efforts required her to form small communities to accomplish particular goals. Once those goals were accomplished the communities disbanded and she formed new ones that were appropriate for the next goal. Dr. Earley is also editing a journal and invited the class to help her with this project by becoming student reviewers. She talked about the importance of being a good community member in the educational community in order to promote the mission of scholarship and research. Dr. Earley has participated in the lobbyist community which has exposed her to the government community. She has also participated in the community of research and scholarship in higher education as she has developed the public policy program at GMU.

Each of the aforementioned lectures needed to access different communities in order to accomplish their research goals. These communities ranged from fellow colleagues helping with Dr. Mastropieri's study to working with another country's education department to improve their educational system. The faculty members discussed how forming a community was like putting together a puzzle. Each piece had its purpose with their research goal and they formed their communities around developing research that would enhance the field. Some of the communities were together for short periods of time while others continued working together.

These faculty members would not have been be able to accomplish their goals as individuals, thus making their communities absolutely necessary to their success.

Comment [j2]: Important comparisons made.

Analysis

In order to achieve a common goal, different communities must establish norms between each other to facilitate the implementation of a research project (St. Clair, 2008). For example, Dr. Mastropieri worked very closely with two graduate students to develop and implement the writing strategy in the public school setting. They had the opportunity to adapt their techniques through daily conversations they had in the car both on the way to and from the research site. However, their goal was different from the goal of the public school. While their goal was to develop an effective writing instruction strategy, the public school teacher's goal was to make sure every student understood the material before they moved on to the next step. In addition to this specific issue, Dr. Mastropieri and her team had to work within the confines of the public school setting to include following the schedule and rules of the school. To solve for this, she was able to convince the teacher that her team would take over the instruction to help with the teaching practice. Nonetheless, the difference in goals had to be accounted for in order for the research team to effectively implement their design study.

Taking this concept one step further, Dr. Mastropieri had to communicate to her team what the goals of the research were to ensure everyone was focused on the same end result. This sort of training is similar to that which ensures inter-rater reliability on more quantitative studies. It is the team leader's responsibility to ensure that the team (in this case the graduate students) is observing phenomenon through the same lens. In this sense, the community of practice must

establish a uniform goal of their research and uniform criteria through which they will measure their results (St. Clair, 2008).

Communities of practice work together to both conduct and apply research to influence the overall educational community (St. Clair, 2008). This was evident in the work being conducted by Dr. Ndura with her partnership with Burundi. Dr. Ndura is applying the effective practices of the American education model to the school systems of Burundi. In order to accomplish this goal, she has had to work closely with both American schools and the minister of education from Burundi. In addition to developing effective education practices for the schools of Burundi, Dr. Ndura has also taken on the responsibility of fundraising for these programs. In order to accomplish her goal, she had to reach out to a wide variety of scholars and donors to help her project.

As a community of practice works together, it is important that new members are brought in to introduce ideas (St. Clair, 2008). Otherwise, the group becomes stagnant in their research enterprises and is unable to develop new ones. Dr. Earley spoke to this issue when talking about the communities with which she interacted in her policy work. These communities of practice came together for very specific issues and were fluid in their membership. This fluidity allows for new members to enter and increases the knowledge base and the variety of opinions. McClellan (2008) discusses this concept in terms of the presidential cabinet. Two term presidents tend to replace the majority of their cabinet to introduce new ideas and ways of thinking into their administration (McClellan, 2008). Communities of practice that fail to do this will eventually fail to be effective as they will lack creativity in their research enterprises.

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Research conducted in communities of practice enhances the field and attempts to answer unresolved questions. Kuhn (1976) discusses the practice of normal science which can be defined as the application of the scientific method to refine theories and make them more precise. Occasionally an anomaly is discovered that requires the community of practice to redefine its models of a specific concept. Communities of practice facilitate the practice of normal science as different members are available to collaborate, replicate, and verify methods and results. Members of the community can challenge others to ensure that proper research methodology is being applied. When an anomaly does occur, the community can work together to develop a new model that will account for the anomaly. While members of the community may disagree, eventually the community will come to a consensus on a new model that will account for the anomaly and once again engage in the practice of normal science to continue making the model more precise (Kuhn, 1976).

Comment [J3]: This section illustrates your growing understanding and interpretation of Cops and an understanding of Wenger's definition. Shows clear reasoning.

Synthesis

At the beginning of the Research and Scholarship in Education course, the author was unfamiliar with the communities of practice concept. The understanding was that research was conducted by a team leader through quantitative methods. While the importance of networking was recognized for professional purposes, the author did not recognize that one had to develop that network to gain resources for research. Publication was seen as important but there was no recognition of the context of a community of practice. Instead, the author thought research findings were simply submitted to journals that could choose to either accept or reject them. There was no awareness of the specificity of journals regarding the types of research they focused on and their target audience. Most importantly, the idea of a community of practice was completely absent in that there was no structure for the manner in which research was conducted

Comment [J4]: Important insight.

and the results disseminated beyond journal publication. While there was an awareness of associations within the educational community, the author had not made a connection between them and a community of practice.

A lesson that was learned in research came from the presentation given by Dr. Mastropieri. In giving her presentation, Dr. Mastropieri discussed the importance of a design research model in her study. Prior to that, the author's perception of research consisted of the belief that methods were developed and then tested to determine if they were effective without giving much consideration to how those methods were developed. The design study allows the researcher to develop the method within the context of the population to which it will be applied. In this case, Dr. Mastropieri engaged the community of her research team and the team from Penn State to develop this method. Once both teams were able to perfect the method, they then have the ability to empirically test it to determine if it is effective. The results of the two different types of studies can be compared to determine if the method needs further refinement.

Dr. Ndura's articles on multiculturalism were very helpful. She conveyed the message of the importance of belonging to many communities and to be vigilant in following through with goals that one finds most important (Ndura). The message of being weary of multicultural differences was a very important one in being a member of a community of practice. We all come from different backgrounds and look at the world through different eyes. While it is important for a community of practice to develop a uniform set of rules, this must be accomplished without stepping on the cultural beliefs of other members of the community. This issue was experienced by the author while teaching special education in a self-contained classroom. The students came from a different cultural background than the author and it took several months for the students and the teacher to find common ground and ways to effectively

communicate with each other. The author focused on researching the cultural background and values so that he could teach the students in a manner that was meaningful to them. Respecting the cultural boundaries facilitated the development of a community in the classroom and helped engage the students in the learning process.

Dr. Earley's discussion of a community being like a puzzle with every piece having a part has been helpful in forming a program committee. As a major in education policy with a secondary concentration in special education has required the author to seek out faculty members who have either a strong interest in one or an interest in both. In forming the committee, there have been encounters with faculty who did not fit as well as they were anticipated. This has caused the author to use the community already formed for new ideas on faculty members that will form a strong committee and community of practice. Based on the dissertation topic, these faculty members may continue to be part of the community or a new community may need to be formed. This remains consistent with Dr. Earley's words of fluidity in regards to communities of practice forming for a goal and then potentially disbanding when that goal has been **achieved**.

Comment [j5]: Three important lessons learned illustrated in these paragraphs.

The Research and Scholarship in Education course has been valuable in the lessons it has taught about communities of practice to the author as an emerging scholar. In addition to the lessons already mentioned, the knowledge about becoming a Graduate Research Assistant was also very helpful. This provides an opportunity to be an **apprentice in the research process** and would allow one to gain firsthand experience in research from the proposal to publication. Overall, the author learned the importance of networking and joining as many communities of practice as possible within one's area of focus. This can help with conducting research as someone in the community may already be working in an area of interest and working with them will prevent another researcher from having to reinvent the wheel. The final lesson learned is

Comment [j6]: Clearly, it does.

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that communities of practice facilitate the development of the field by allowing the members to collaboratively develop effective models that can be researched and disseminated throughout the field via either publication or conferences. The result of this research is open to further study by the community to refine the models and develop knowledge within a particular field of practice.

David:

Paper exceeds expectations. Demonstrates deep reflection, analysis, and synthesis. Shows the powerful lessons you are taking with you from the course.

Synthesis paper: A

Final grade: A

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