

A Reflective Essay

Community of Practice

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Etienne Wenger describes communities of practices as “the basic building blocks of a social learning system.” Her paper on social learning systems states that by combining three elements - joint enterprise, relationships of mutuality, and shared repertoire – communities of practice are able to define competence. The interplay between this social competence and our own experiences is when learning takes place. Further, through three modes of belonging - engagement, imagination, and alignment – she looks at this structural element of learning systems and then goes on to analyze the fundamentals of community design. The argument advanced is that “the success of an organization depends on their ability to design themselves as a social learning system”. By considering the role of events, leadership, connectivity, membership, projects, and artifacts, a prototypical community is finally developed. In this paper, I seek to evaluate this framework by reflecting on my own experience at a recent Meetup event, about cloud computing, I attended and attempting to understand concepts that did and did not apply from her theories to this community of practice. I will first step through all nine interactions between the modes of belonging and the dimensions of community and finish by making some recommendations that both this community and I can try to enhance the learning experience.

Engagement, the first mode of belonging, was a theme central to my community of practice. Inherently, the sessions depend on doing things together and meeting up for a specific event. In this case to learn; hence enterprise, the level of learning energy, was high – again not surprisingly though. A meetup such as this was specially designed to provide an initiative that promotes learning about various cloud computing technologies. The session I attended consisted of not only a networking time, but a formal presentation from Cloudflare demoing some new tools that were being developed. I liked the spirit of inquiry in the room – several developers (who I also got a chance to interact with earlier) asked questions. It was interesting to note that some answers were also presented by other members at the meetup, not just the presenters. This led to a casual but fairly informative discussion. Most of the conversation went above my head however; others in the room seemed to be satisfied by the answers: a display of competence within the group. Their competence around the subject of network workers “pulls my experience” though – I realize this must be an important topic to learn. There was even a practice exercise (setup by the presenters) that everyone got to work through. This act of engagement clearly displayed a joint inquiry within the meetup members. During this activity, I could tell that there were certainly others who did not know much about workers in the context of web application but other member worked with us to fill in (at least some of) the gap in our knowledge. These types of practical application of the tools also builds mutuality within the event. By being honest about my technical fallacies on cloud computing, I was able to call for help and the trust was reciprocated by the community. Everybody seemed to be comfortable addressing each other’s issues. By working together, we were able to identify, not only gaps in skills, but also limitations of the tools. In hindsight, perhaps we would not have been able to do this had the level of engagement not been high. The group at the meetup seemed to have a fairly strong repertoire, the degree of self-awareness. Even

though it was the first time I was attending the session, it was obvious that similar events must have happened in the past. There seemed to be a set schedule and most members seemed aware of the chronological order of events – a classic example of a shared experience in my eyes. I got to talk to the organizer of the event as well: he seemed excited that I was from UT and we discussed the possibility of hosting a session on campus at some point. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I now understand that this is how the group must have expanded – through informal interactions – and moved forward. The size of session was around 30-40 people, a perfect size in my opinion. This enables a high degree of self-awareness as most members seemed to understand the state of the meetup - any larger and it might be hard to maintain the same level.

The mode of belonging, Imagination, did not seem as relevant to this community of practice. Although enterprise levels were high and there was certainly a sense of community, there did not seem to be a clear vision for the potential of the future of its membership. The learning agenda was set, by definition of the meetup, and there did not seem much need for vision of the event. Participation seemed to be mainly inspired by the desire to advance individual skillset but I did not get the feeling the group wanted to do anything more than that. This also makes sense to me though – a meetup happens sporadically, mostly during evenings, and does not expect any form of commitment from the attendees. It's hard to build anything more than a community of ideas with this structure. That being said, I do believe that a thriving melting pot of notions can often be a springboard for startups and I can envision groups of people meeting, working, and befriending other members from the meetup. For this reason, mutuality seemed to reasonably aligned to this mission: most people (albeit developers) were there after their work day and everyone understood that this was a way for techies to expand their learnings outside of their day job. Even the organizers, the thought leaders, seemed content at this level of participation. Which, in my opinion, is a good thing – it signifies that they are very much self-aware and attune to the needs of the community, although there did not seem much outside of the idea of a meetup event that would allow “self-representations for the community to see itself in new ways.”

The final mode of belonging, Alignment, is perhaps the most interesting to reflect on from my experience of attending this meetup. Members have obviously articulated a shared purpose – you have to write a description for the event – but, I'm not sure how distributed the leadership is. The organizer, although self aware of the group's needs, seems to be the only person in charge of contacting people to present and demo. Cloudfare's presentation, at times, seemed to be a sales pitch and a way to entice developers to begin using their tools and hopefully become their spokesperson at their respective organizations. It makes me question the accountability of this practice – it seems like companies that get to demo their technology gain a little bit of unfair exposure and the organizer holds power over this transaction. I want to refrain from judging prematurely, as I have only attended one session, but it I would feel more comfortable with this norm if I knew the members have a larger say on who and what

gets to be presented at the sessions. If not, I would certainly say the mutuality of the group is a little low and that more negotiated commitments needs to take place for a more enriched experience from a developer's point of view. It's also interesting to observe how certain repertoire are transmitted to new members. Again, by definition, if turnover rate is low in a meetup then it would remain in a constant state of redefining of standards and routine. This specific event seemed to have a lot of recurring members and so this might be such an issue with this group, but I can now understand how this might be a real issue in a lot of meetups.

In summary, the cloud computing meetup I attended is doing well at hosting events that are well tuned to its needs and encourage high levels of engagement. Connectivity and communication between members of the community also seems to be open, honest, and enriching. As mentioned earlier, membership of the community, at least at present, does not seem to be over-extended or below critical mass. I would, however, recommend distributing the role of 'community coordinator' a little more to ensure a diversity in learning agenda and that they start building multiple forms of leaders to can help balance each other out. There might also be some scope for building learning projects and producing artifacts, although this might be a little tough in the format of a meetup. Although there certainly seemed to be enough of a regular membership to achieve this, it could get a little intimidating for newcomers (I can only imagine how I would have felt if I had been dropped in the middle of a workerless cloud service designing session). By looking at this experience through the lens of the framework provided by Wenger, I was able to understand the community at a much deeper level. I think I picked up on some of the reflections above intuitively, but by analyzing the design of the social learning system through the specified dimensions, I am able to categorize its strengths and weaknesses and better gage the effectiveness of an organization.

References

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