A Reflective Essay

# Community of Practice

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Etienne Wenger describes communities of practice as "the basic building blocks of a social learning system" (Wenger p.229). Her paper on the topic 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 actually takes place. Further, through three modes of belonging - engagement, imagination, and alignment – she looks at the structural elements of learning systems and 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" (Wenger p.226). 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 of a Meetup depend on doing things together and getting together up for a specific event. In this case to learn; hence enterprise, the level of learning energy, was high – again not very surprising though. A Meetup such as this was specially designed to provide an initiative that promotes learning about various cloud computing technologies. The specific session I attended consisted of not only networking time at the beginning, but also 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 of the answers were presented by other members at the meetup, not just the presenters. This led to a casual but fairly informative discussion amongst the attendees. Most of the conversation went above my head however; others in the room seemed to be satisfied by the responses: a display of competence within the group. Their competence around the subject of network workers "pulls my experience" though – I realize that this must a be an important topic to learn (Wenger p.227). 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, like myself, did not know much about workers in the context of web applications. Thankfully, some of the more experienced membership worked with us to fill in (at least some of) the gap in our knowledge. I believe that these types of practical collaborations of the tools promotes mutuality within the event. By being honest about my technical fallacies on cloud computing, I was able to call for help and that 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 as well. In hindsight, perhaps we would not have been able

to do this had the level of engagement not been as high as it was. The group at the meetup also seemed to have a fairly strong repertoire, the degree of self-awareness. Even though it was the first time I was attending the sessions, it was obvious that similar events must have been arranged in the past. There appeared to be a set schedule and most members seemed aware of the chronological order of events that were to take place– a classic example of a shared experience in my eyes. I got to talk to the organizer of the event as well: he seemed be excited that I was from UT and we discussed the possibility of hosting a session on campus at some point in the future. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I now understand that this is how the group must have expanded – through such informal interactions – and moved forward as a community. The size of the session was around 30-40 people, a perfect size in my opinion. These proportions enable a high degree of self-awareness because most members seemed cognizant of the state of the meetup community intricately- any larger and it might be hard to maintain the same level of consciousness.

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 its membership. The learning agenda was pre-set, by the very definition of the Meetup, and there did not seem much need for vision at the event itself. Participation seemed to be mainly inspired by the desire to advance individual skillset but I did not get the feeling the group wanted anything more than that. This also makes sense to me though – a Meetup usually 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 within this kind of structure. That being said, I do believe that a thriving melting pot of concepts can often be a springboard for startups and I can envision subsets of people meeting, working, and befriending other members from the sessions. For this reason, mutuality seemed to  be reasonably aligned to this mission: most individuals 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 organizer, the thought leader, 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. However, there did not seem to be much outside of the idea of a being Meetup event that would allow for "self-representations of the community to see itself in new ways" (Wenger p.231).

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 – by the very notion that you must 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 offering – potentially even become their spokesperson at their respective organizations. This, however, makes me question the

accountability of the practice – it seems like companies that get to demo their technology gain a little bit of unfair exposure to the developer community and therefore the organizer holds some power over this social transaction. I want to refrain from judging prematurely, as I have only attended one session, but I would feel more comfortable with this norm had I seen the members have a larger say on who and what gets to be presented at the sessions. Hence, I would certainly say the mutuality of the group is a little low and that more negotiated commitments need 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. If turnover rate is high in a Meetup, it would remain in a constant state of redefining its standards and routine. This specific event seemed to have a lot of recurring members and so this might not be such an issue within this community, but I can now understand how this might be a real problem in a lot of Meetups. In this sense, the leadership has done well to retain a core set of practitioners.

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 that a diversity in the learning agenda and that they start building multiple forms of leaders so that they can help balance each other out. There might also be some scope for building more longer-term learning projects and producing artifacts that might be useful to preserve. This can be time-consuming however and therefore might be a little tough in the format of a Meetup. Although there certainly seemed to be enough of a regular membership to achieve extended goals, it could get a little intimidating for newcomers (I can only imagine how I would have felt had been dropped into the middle of a workerless cloud-service designing session). By looking at my 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 at the time, but by analyzing the design of the social learning system through the specified dimensions, I am now better able to categorize its strengths and weaknesses to more effectively gage the success of its organization. As an apprentice in this community of practice, my experience was certainly shaped by their established level of competence and I recognize the learnings I can continue to take away from the relationship between the two.

# References

Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems. Organization, 7(2), 225–246. https://doi.org/10.1177/135050840072002