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Developing Professional Identities through a Research Community of Practice

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Using the theoretical lens of Wenger's Communities of Practice, this paper examines how the evolving practices of a group of doctoral students led to the development of a research community. Those practices included peer editing, joint publications, conference presentations, academic retreats, e-list discussions and more. This paper will concentrate on three areas that helped the community develop: conference presentations, workshops, and publications. Narratives are used to illustrate the ways in which the group members were transformed by participating in evolving academic networks while meeting the demands of their professional teaching lives and research interests. Strategies for developing a community are also provided.

本稿は、ウェンガーのコミュニティー・オブ・プラクティスのレンズを通して、ある博士課程で学ぶ学生たちがいかに研究コミュニティーを築いていったかを検証する。このプラクティスは相互校閲、共同出版、学会発表、研究合宿、eメールリストでの討論などからなりたっている。本稿ではとくにワークショップ、学会発表、出版という、コミュニティー形成に役立った3つの活動を中心に論ずる。教師としての職務を果たしながら、しだいに広がっていく研究のネットワークのなかで、変化成長していく自分達の様子を、グループの構成員たちが自ら語る。

Introduction

Professional development in Japan often entails more institutional and personal constraints than opportunities. Compared with our North American counterparts attending full-time graduate programs on sprawling campuses with their implied resources, teacher-researchers or graduate-level students in Japan face considerably more restrictions as we attempt to balance our full-time work and family life with the opportunities afforded through networking and distance learning. Indeed, rather than being a community-based experience, professional development for teachers in Japan is often conceived as an individual endeavor. While many individuals identify strategies to further themselves professionally, the degree to which individual growth can be expanded by or contribute to a sense of community with other developing professionals varies greatly. Furthermore, the strategies that we employ as individuals are often only informally shared with peers.

It is the intent of this short paper to present an alternative model to professional development that is both theoretically and experientially based. Using narratives and drawing from Wenger's (1998) notion of Communities of Practice (CoP), we will discuss how a research community of peers coalesced in 2000 and evolved into a dynamic system of professional development. After outlining Wenger's central thesis and illustrating how his framework might be applied to teachers working in Japan, we will move to our narrative of a community of professionals in Japan called the QBook¹. For the sake of clarity, our narratives will be framed around three venues for professional development: conferences, workshops and publications. As we discuss each of these, we shall reveal how the need for our community arose, outline the

activities that we jointly engaged in and provide examples of how we evolved as individuals as a result of our participation in our community. We will conclude by drawing on our experiences to suggest strategies that others might use to integrate individual professional development with community formation.

Wenger's community of practice

Wenger's (1998) central thesis is that learning occurs in and through social participation. According to Wenger, newcomers are apprenticed into the practices of a community by working with old-timers who are at various stages in their own learning. By engaging in different levels of participation, newcomers progress from the outer edges of a community towards the core, and as they do so their own learning occurs and their identity in the community is transformed. For example, upon his arrival in Japan in 1992, Steve joined JALT and became a peripheral² participant reading JALT publications and attending annual conferences. He then got involved in JALT by presenting at the JALT 1996 conference and subsequently working on the Proceedings first by responding to prospective articles then serving as an editor with a more experienced peer. He is now continuing his development in his position of associate editor for the JALT Journal.

While this example helps illustrate the basic outline of Wenger's framework, our experience adds a level of complexity to this unproblematic portrayal of community and apprenticeship. To begin with, the QBook was not part of a pre-existing institution. Our research community was created from the synergy of members in two Temple University Japan (TUIJ) doctoral cohorts in Osaka and Tokyo nourished through the involvement of graduate students and faculty from TUIJ

and other institutions. Thus, our community was formed at the intersection of institutions, and we have generated many of our activities in venues (publications, JALT presentations) both connected to and those (workshops, presentations at international conferences) unassociated with our previous institutional identities. As such, our professional development cannot be simply seen as apprenticeship into the practices of a single pre-existing community. Rather, our professional and community developmental stages were interactively realized by playing the academic game in a “constellation of communities of practice” (cf. Wenger, 1998, Chapter 5).

There are two corollaries to the observation that our community developed at the nexus of pre-existing communities. First of all, our community has gone through and continues to experience change. As we engaged in joint activities, learned together in the process and evolved as academics, our community has also matured through members’ participation in a variety of endeavors mentioned above. As Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) note, communities go through different stages of development, coalescing after recognizing the potential for community formation and then engaging in increased levels of activity as they mature and seek out ways to maintain their existence. A second corollary to community development at the nexus is that individuals active in creating the community are not simply “outsiders” or “newcomers” to the community in question. We all came to our community with complex identities created through interaction in other contexts. For example, prior to becoming an active member and organizer in our small community of nascent academics, Andrea had acquired considerable background knowledge of critical theory applied in feminist research and had introduced a course in feminism at her junior college. Among the identities peers

brought to our group were female Chinese national teacher of English at TUJ and American male foreign worker union activist and researcher. In other words, we did not come to our evolving community as blank slates upon which the implicit understandings of apprenticeship were inscribed. Our previous identities and outside demands on our time sometimes impeded and at other times facilitated our participation and ongoing learning. Having thus outlined Wenger’s framework and illustrated how it might be applied to a community of educators/researchers in Japan, let us now turn to how our community evolved in three different venues.

Conferences

From the time we had completed the qualitative research component of our studies at TUJ in the summer of 1999 until this JALT presentation (November 2003), we presented at many different conferences both together and individually. By outlining the nature of some of these presentations we can trace the development of this research community.

Vancouver, AAAL 2000

At this point in time our research community was just developing and was what Wenger refers to as a potential community. Eton and Steve were presenting on work we had begun earlier, Steve was looking at learner and native dictionaries, while Eton was presenting on the acquisition of requests in an EFL situation. All three of us were active professionally through participation at JALT, TESOL, and other conferences. Yet, something seemed different. Steve recalls feeling that the American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAAL) conference in Vancouver was going to be different from his previous conference experiences. He had a new level

of nervousness, not the healthy kind that is good before going on stage, but more of an “are you good enough to be playing in the big leagues” type of nervousness. In the past, most of his work had been on teaching techniques or methods and this time he was going to be presenting quantitative research to an audience comprised of applied linguists. He was confident he had a sound quantitative study comparing a learner dictionary with a native speaker dictionary, but he knew he risked being disabused of this feeling in public by any one of the many scholars attending his session. He was a newcomer to the community of researchers presenting at AAAL, yet he had a legitimate reason to be there and he was working on moving from a peripheral position to a position involving more intense participation, what Wenger refers to as an inward trajectory. As the conference ended we found ourselves busier than ever. We were reading more because the AAAL presentations we had attended helped us realize we needed to learn more about the work of theorists such as Gee, Foucault, and Wenger. Shortly after the conference, we also began to see the potential of collaboratively working through these theorists and others in workshop settings. As noted later in this paper, we organized our first workshop in the summer of 2000 following AAAL in Vancouver. We also were learning about qualitative research methods firsthand as we began our studies.

St. Louis, AAAL 2001

Though only a year later, AAAL in St. Louis was a totally different experience. No longer were we presenting individually on dictionaries or pragmatics, but we were collaborating on a colloquium with peers and mentors who had become a part of our research community. We had coalesced, to use Wenger’s term, into a research community of practice. Whereas a year earlier we were just being introduced to some of the theories

and writers who were to influence our research, now, in St. Louis, we were a group of scholars that had devoted close to a year wrestling with the notions of Gee’s (1996) *Discourse and* Wenger’s (1998) *Communities of Practice* and we were trying to apply these theories to diverse research sites in Japan, thus bringing a new level of complexity to the study of the dynamics of language learning. In the intervening year we had been busy. We had presented individually at the 2001 TUJ Colloquium on students’ investment and resistance in learning English, on using computers to analyze data from a study on attitudes toward gender and education, and together on a JALT panel on qualitative research and the language classroom. It was through these presentations and the subsequent articles they generated that we were polishing our research skills and moving from the positions on the periphery towards positions near the center of our community. As we left St. Louis the research community we had become a part of had proven to be valuable and viable and was entering its mature stage as we began to clarify its focus, role, and boundaries.

Singapore, AILA 2002

Though less than a year after St. Louis, incredible changes had occurred in our community. Andrea and Eton had both completed their dissertation research and had successfully defended it, as had two other members of our community. Others of us were entering the final stretch as we concentrated on writing up our findings in anticipation of completing our degrees. We had put together a colloquium on language learning in the face of national policy to be presented at the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) in Singapore. Now in retrospect we can see that we had changed; the nervousness that was mentioned earlier had disappeared as we had gained confidence both in interacting with other

researchers at the conference and in presenting the results of our research. In addition while still a part of our community some of us were moving beyond it as we started or were asked to take part in new projects. The research community that had coalesced following Vancouver in 2000 had matured and was even transforming as some members moved on while others continued to collaborate in 2003 at AAAL in Arlington and at JALT in Shizuoka.

Workshops

Although conference presentations have been a vital component of our professional development, weekend workshops at TUJ and workshops we organized have also played an integral role in our research community. Andrea marks the beginning of her individual trajectory to becoming a professional academic with her attendance in 1995 at a TUJ workshop led by Janet Holmes, a feminist sociolinguist concerned with gender and language issues. The TUJ workshop kickstarted Andrea's developing awareness of how her position as a female teacher in an all female college, her life as a wife and mother, and her myriad social interactions and experiences as a woman in Japanese society could be integrated into future academic projects. At around the same time, the formation of a group of women educators in Japan called WELL (Women Educators and Language Learners) and later a JALT SIG group, GALE (Gender Awareness in Language Education), provided Andrea with both a forum for participation and a valuable source of support and information about the particular circumstances of professional women educators (Japanese and non-Japanese) in the Japanese educational system. Although a peripheral member in these different communities, the groundwork had nevertheless been laid for what Andrea chose to focus on for her dissertation project and subsequent academic papers.

As mentioned above in the Introduction, members enter a CofP with their own personal histories and goals which become integrated with the histories and goals of other members in the community through social interactions involving a process of alignment wherein conflicts arise and are resolved (or not) through negotiation with other members. The different types of interactions between core-members (or those with more experience) and peripheral members (or newcomers) are what defines the nature of a CofP, how members appropriate the knowledge being generated within and beyond the borders of the CofP, and how identities are transformed. These defining characteristics of a CofP are illustrated in the following description of Andrea's experiences at the 2000 Nagoya Qualitative Research workshop and the 2002 Tokyo Writing workshop which she facilitated together with her mentor, Kathryn Davis.

At the end of her doctoral coursework in 2000, Andrea had adequate theoretical and procedural knowledge to carry out a major research project. However, in order for her to make a connection between the received, abstract knowledge of her doctoral courses and the practical realities of doing research, she felt the need to go public with some of her data and preliminary hunches in the presence of peers and advisors in a larger qualitative group which had recently formed through the efforts of some TUJ Tokyo cohort members. Presenting her research at the Nagoya workshop in the company of "old timers" who were beyond her current level of knowledge provided Andrea with the critical feedback needed to refine her analyses. For example, the issue of positionality, i.e., how Andrea's different roles as a feminist researcher positioned her one way or another vis à vis her study's participants, needed to be addressed in terms of bias and how her conclusions

could be affected as a result. Yasuko Kanno, an accomplished qualitative researcher on Japanese returnees' identity issues, was an attendee at the workshop and commented on the many different hats that Andrea seemed to be wearing during her study, that is, she was her participants' teacher, a professor in the educational setting she was investigating, and a white, western female researcher in Japan. Yasuko's comments helped Andrea realize that she would need to seriously consider the issue of positionality and familiarize herself with ways of dealing with this important point. Therefore, by taking one step beyond the safe space of her doctoral cohort and interacting with more seasoned scholars, Andrea was able to start her identity shift from that of a tentative academic to becoming a more engaged, knowledgeable member in a budding qualitative CoFP in Japan and, a few years later, in a larger international community of scholars. Likewise for Steve and Eton, the Nagoya workshop and a later workshop in Kyoto in 2001 served as critical opportunities for social/academic interactions with peers and mentors in order to expand their understandings of, for example, Wenger's notion of CoFP and exploring how it might be applicable to their studies. The workshops provided a relatively safe space in which to share and learn together, and as a result, also allowed us to identify some of our common interests and to begin conceptualizing future joint activities.

By the time of the 2002 Qualitative Writing workshop, both Andrea's position in what had become the QBook CoFP together with her academic identity had undergone a radical change. How did this identity transformation evolve? Prior to the workshop, Andrea's doctoral defense had signaled her official entry into the world of professional academia and thus reified the otherwise abstract notion of "becoming an academic." In preparation for the workshop, while reflecting on the different

kinds of comments from advisors on her dissertation, Andrea realized that she had unconsciously internalized the knowledge of how to write a qualitative research report and was now able to distribute this knowledge with a certain degree of authority. Andrea's mentor acknowledged this identity switch from doctoral student to colleague by consenting to co-present at the workshop. Additionally, QBook peers who, by their agreeing to sit and listen to what Andrea had to say, were in effect legitimizing her shift to a core position in our CoFP. If this kind of investment and mutual engagement in a CoFP is sustained, one's inward trajectory to a core position in the same community or outward to membership in different CoFPs becomes a self-perpetuating process wherein new relationships and identities provide new ways of being a professional academic. Reflecting back to the beginning of her doctoral courses when she was uncertain about whether she would be able to keep up with the other cohort members, Andrea has come to realize the importance of continuous engagement in academic communities of practice. Finally, she now locates herself at a developmental stage of the QBook CoFP wherein the community no longer plays such an active role in her life but nevertheless remains an important component of her professional identity.

Publications

Both the workshops and conference presentations served as springboards for another form of community and professional development, namely writing for and editing publications. In the month following the Nagoya workshop, the momentum that had been generated continued on-line as five members of our community put together abstracts for the AAAL 2001 colloquium. Exchanging abstracts on-line, we provided each

other feedback and also had the opportunity to eavesdrop as three more experienced professionals helped us revise and then proceeded to weave the individual papers into a coherent proposal for a panel on the theoretical intersection of Communities of Practice and Discourse. Drawing on an analogy based on Lave's study of apprenticeship in a tailor's shop (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 71-72), we had our hands full with trying to cut out the pattern of our respective abstracts, but we were simultaneously learning as we witnessed more experienced tailors sew our respective contributions together into a marketable suit. This process of learning through on-line editing and revising continued later in the year as we forwarded copies of our papers to fellow panel members and discussants in the days leading up to the presentation. Later, we would directly draw on this experience to help put together panels involving the QBook at the 2001 TUJ Colloquium, JALT 2001, AILA 2002, and AAAL 2003. Later in the fall of 2001, we also engaged in a similar process on line as the three of us put together an article for the JALT 2001 Proceedings, our first joint publication. The experience of writing for the proceedings (2001, 2003) and preparing for AAAL 2001 with our peers and our mentors helped socialize us into the ways that academics in our field comment on and edit each others papers.

Many of the things that we were learning in preparing for AAAL 2001 soon provided the potential for another publication opportunity. No sooner had we returned to Japan than John McLaughlin, a fellow QBook member, suggested using our AAAL papers to create a Working Papers volume at TUJ (Churchill & McLaughlin, 2001). Using papers from the AAAL colloquium as a core, we sent out a call for papers and received contributions from Andrea, Steve, others in our community, and others who were outside our community. As John and Eton

provided feedback on papers, we drew on the on-line editing experience that we had in preparation for AAAL. John and Eton became intellectual scaffolds for each other as they compared their feedback and worked through specifications of the American Psychological Association (APA) publishing manual. They also learned a great deal from the contributing authors. For instance, Steve, having more experience with publications, showed Eton how an author can proactively respond to editor comments by asking questions or pointing out alternative interpretations or approaches. We had some differences of opinion, but we were able to negotiate these differences in a professional manner. In terms of process, John and Eton also got a first hand introduction to some of the politics of editing as they attempted to nurture the work of writers working in a second language while finding themselves drawn into negotiations with more experienced writers such as Steve. Finally, in his capacity as an editor, Eton also learned a great deal from contributors such as Andrea who introduced him to refined understandings of theoretical perspectives that he had barely begun to grapple with.

Concurrently, Steve had organized another publication venue related to our research interests. With Amy Yamashiro, Steve edited a special issue of *The Language Teacher* (June, 2002) on the topic of social identity. Indicative of the symbiotic energies generated across community activities such as workshops, conferences and publications, contributors to this special issue included Yasuko Kanno and Bonny Norton who had joined us or taught us in workshops and taken an interest in our conference presentations. Similarly, connections made at conferences and workshops at TUJ have afforded Steve and Andrea the opportunity to write book reviews for the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*.

Meanwhile, Eton and John's editing experience precipitated a joint article in the TESOL Professional development in language series (Murphey, 2003). Most recently, a chapter of Andrea's dissertation was published (Simon-Maeda, 2003) in a volume of the Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series edited by Bonny Norton and Aneta Pavlenko and Andrea has an article on the construction of female professional identities in *TESOL Quarterly* (Simon-Maeda, 2004). Thus, by writing conference abstracts and proceedings, presenting at international conferences, editing publications in Japan and otherwise familiarizing more experienced professionals with our research interests, we have played our part in opening up further professional development opportunities that extend beyond our community of peers and into the larger TESOL community.

Conclusion

As the narratives in this article illustrate, the processes of *developing* professionally are dialectically intertwined with the activities of *belonging* to a CoFP. The different terms used above (e.g., negotiation, alignment, scaffold) are not mutually exclusive items but are rather mutually constitutive and self-perpetuating, that is, together they are both the cause and effect of ongoing interactions and identity transformations within and beyond a CoFP. Ultimately, CoFPs develop out of the needs and practices of members in response to, as in the case of the QBook CoFP, institutional constraints on individuals developing their full potential as both professional and social beings. Related to this last point, the following list of strategies are applicable to general practitioners or anyone interested in ways to nurture and develop a community of like-minded educators and researchers. The strategies are based on the collaborative work of two QBook members, Steve Cornwell & John McLaughlin (2003).

1. Develop a flexible but dedicated core of collaborators who are willing to help with various projects. In this way, responsibilities can be shared and burnout can be avoided.
2. Use information technology to provide members with multiple means to participate. Information technology has helped us communicate and has allowed every member to stay connected.
3. Find a balance in the means of communicating and participating for those who are interested.
4. Seize opportunities as they come or create them by building a critical mass of support among colleagues.
5. Be aware of local institutional resources that can help the group and share those opportunities with others
6. Find a research focus and advisors who can nurture a group interested in learning more about it. If the group can sustain a variety of activities, so much the better.
7. Keep the group flexible and based on mutual interest and benefit.

We have shared many venues that helped our group become a research community; we hope that this article may help you pursue your professional development as well.

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Endnotes

¹ The QBook refers to our community of peers. Originally used as a mailing list name for a group of graduate students at Temple University Japan interested in conducting qualitative research, the term has evolved to refer to the group and its activities and is used as such in this paper. The QBook was created from the synergy of members in two TUJ doctoral cohorts in Osaka and Tokyo, nourished by the intermittent participation of a visiting professor and built upon through the involvement of graduate students and faculty from TUJ and other institutions. Currently, the group consists of 12 members (Japanese, Chinese and American nationals) including the three authors of this paper.

² The word "peripheral" in CofP theory is not meant to denote an inferior position to that of the "old-timers" or "core members" but is just one unit of analysis in a system in which every member's participation is legitimate and necessary for the ongoing group dynamics. The "newcomer," however, must learn the practices and discourses of the community which, at the same time, must accommodate the newcomer who has the power to transform the community through the integration of her unique identity which will also undergo some kind of transformation. Therefore, there is a dialectical, democratic relationship between all members of a CofP.