

Discourse Analysis in an ESL Community of Practice

Akiko Nagao
Ritsumeikan University

Reference Data:

Nagao, A. (2013). Discourse analysis in an ESL community of practice. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2012 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

In this study I examined the process of ESL learners joining different academic learning communities in Australia. Using a sociocultural lens and Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice model, I investigated how newcomers became experienced learners through interactions by documenting their engagement. Participants' classroom interactions were observed and recorded once a week for over 6 months. Discourse analysis, self-reflection, and rhetorical units analysis were used to examine their evolving roles. One implication is that the model of education should shift from knowledge transmission attribution to participant attribution in order to explain how learning takes place within classrooms.

日本人大学生である被験者がオーストラリアの大学付属語学学校であるESL学習コミュニティに参加し、どのようにメンバー達とかわり合い言語能力を伸ばしていくかを理解するために、被験者とそのクラスメートの談話を分析した。授業観察・クラスルーム談話分析・インタビュー分析を含んだ追跡調査から、以下の結果を得た。一定期間内で被験者の言語能力の変化の記録に成功し、被験者が帰属する集団内で「周辺の」から「中心的」な役割を果たすようになる為に必要な要素を記録した。

FROM A sociocultural perspective, I investigated how a newcomer became an experienced learner through interactions in an applied linguistics classroom community by documenting student engagement in peer and classroom discussions. Two fundamental ideas of the socialization theory of language learning formed the basis for this investigation. The first was that people in communities develop social practices and literacy activities through participation in relationships with others (Mickan, 2006, 2013; Wenger, 1998). The second was that to make sense of communities of social practice, newcomers are required to accustom themselves to the meanings and appropriate uses of different semiotic community resources (Halliday, 1978; Mickan, 2006). Thus, I discuss the case of a Japanese university student (J1) and her peers, focusing on how she developed relationships and accessed community resources in pursuing spoken language proficiency in English. In this paper, interviews were used for self-reflection analysis on J1's narratives, and rhetorical unit analysis (RU analysis) was used to investigate and understand her role as a participant in the classroom community. The results of this study on the interactions and self-reflections reveal that language learning in classroom communities is different from learning about language rules and grammatical patterns of usage. Learning occurs when students participate in ongoing communication tasks by using the target language to make meaning. One implication of this research is that the



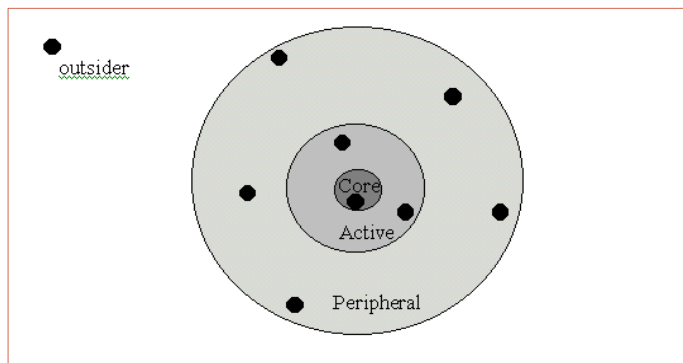
model of language learning education should shift from knowledge transmission attribution to participant attribution in order to better account for how learning takes place within classroom communities of practice, through varieties of social practice.

Literature Review

Communities of Practice (CoP) Model

The perspective I take in this paper is that learning occurs through participation in communities to which participants belong, described as CoPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Participation is essential not only for learning, but also for the development of the community. The degree of participation in a community falls into one of three groups: peripheral, active, and core (Wenger, 2002). For further clarification, refer to Figure 1.

Figure 1. Wenger's Degree of Community Participation (Adapted From Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002)



Members who engage in discussion or debate and take on community projects are core members who assume the roles of leaders and coordinators (Wenger, 2002). According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), participants in the core frequently engage in verbal participation and have superior knowledge and understanding compared to other participants because they have had opportunities to work in different contexts and situations in the community. The next level of community membership and participation is active members, who attend activities and events as regular meetings and occasionally participate in community forums, albeit less often than core members. Third are peripheral members, including new members to the community, who keep to the sidelines, watching interactions between core and active members instead of participating in discussions (Wenger et al., 2002). Over time, newcomers can move from the periphery to the core, constructing an identity based on their experiences and the relationships that develop within the CoP, which in turn can transform the community itself. This accommodation and transformation of CoPs through changes and transformation in membership is referred to as "legitimate peripheral participation (LPP)" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29).

According to Wenger's model, learning occurs through engaging in social practices in a CoP (Guzdial & Tew, 2006). To become community members, newcomers need to observe models of accepted community discourse and receive scaffolding and coaching from more experienced members. In the classroom, this could mean more experienced or proficient students assisting their less experienced or less proficient classmates. This mentoring is necessary because to make sense of communities of social practice, newcomers must acclimate to the shared meanings within their new community and learn to appropriately use its different social practices and semiotic resources (Halliday, 1978; Mickan, 2006). Newcomers can gradually move from peripheral roles to more central roles, thereby achieving

fuller participation, transforming into more core, experienced learners who demonstrate: (a) improved and expanded knowledge and skills, (b) changes and improvement in relationships between themselves and other community members, and (c) changes in learners' identities (Takagi, 1999). Identities are formed when "people are generally accustomed to seeing themselves as having a nature and an identity which exist prior to their participation in social groups and the roles and the relations they establish in these groups" (Hyland, 2012, p. 2).

Social Practices

Chapman and Pyvis (2005) stated that in social practices, learning is viewed as "a situated activity in which issues of cognition, context, and social interaction cannot be considered in isolation from each other" (p. 40). From a socio-cultural point of view, people learn because they want to be involved in new activities, complete new tasks, work out new functions, and gain new understandings. These new activities, tasks, functions, and ways of understanding are elements of social practices. Social practices are regular patterns of actions, socially constructed through constant repetition and recognized ways of doing things in a community (Lemke, 1995, p. 102). Diverse social practices, which change according to the stated and understood rules in different communities, are produced in CoPs (Gee & Green, 1998; Luke, 1993; Mickan, Lucas, Davies, & Lim, 2007). These social practices are part of the learning process for all participants whereby language is used to make meaning from cultural practices (Knobel & Healy, 1998; Mickan, 2004).

Self-Reflection

In order to understand how J1 transformed from a newcomer to an experienced learner, different types of social practices in which J1 and her classmates engaged are determined through

analysis of J1's self-reflection interview. Learners can learn by reflecting on their experiences (Dewey, 1993), a highly cognitive process. As Daudelin (2003) explained, "When a person engages in reflection, he or she takes an experience from the outside world, brings it inside the mind, turns it over, makes connections to other experiences, and filters it through personal biases" (p. 39). In Bell's (1998) study, self-reflection on learning provided learners an opportunity to evaluate their study and learning approach in order to be able to manage their learning performance, thus showing that learning and reflection are interrelated. Reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience in order to ponder the experience and then to be influenced by the reflection, or as Daudelin (2003) put it, "Learning is the creation of meaning from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behavior" (p. 39). Overall, reflection helps learners to understand themselves, their knowledge, and their roles in societies through interaction with others and can eventually lead to learner autonomy (Waguri, 2010).

Using RU Analysis

In order to identify J1's language features and progress during peer interactions, rhetorical activities were examined using transcribed classroom discourse between J1 and her peers from a selected classroom observation. Rhetorical Units (RU; Cloran, 1994) are influenced by Vygotsky's (1934/1986) notion of the relationship between higher and lower mental functions. Lower mental functions occur in elementary stages of development, such as mother-child interactions (Wake, 2006). For example, a basic mother-child pattern of interaction is directly related to a material base where the child demands goods and services that the mother provides. On the other hand, higher mental functions include the formation of concepts and problem solving. Figure 2 shows the cline represented by RUs, wherein people who engage in higher mental functions can predict future

events or stages, guess what might or might not happen, and also express inherent attributes or characteristic functions, while those at the more basic level, such as infants, exhibit less introspective cognitive activity (Wake, 2006).

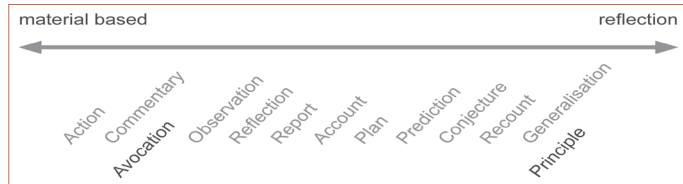


Figure 2. Cloran's RUs (1994) (Adapted From Wake, 2006, p. 204).

Research Question

This research examines the extent to which one student engaged in different levels of participation during peer discussions using Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP framework. It considers the demands placed on the subject and her conversational participants in these encounters and explores how the interlocutors met those demands. The present study poses the following research question: How is J1, a newcomer, repositioned as an experienced learner through interacting with classmates and teachers in pair, group, and classroom discussions through varieties of social practices?

Methodology

Data Collection: Classroom Observations and Interviews

This study employed classroom observations and participant interviews. J1's classroom interactions with peers and her teachers

were observed and recorded over 6 months between 2007 and 2008, 90 minutes per week. All in-class participant interactions with her peers were recorded and transcribed. Field notes during classroom observations were used for the macro-analysis to understand the classroom dynamics. Recorded interviews with J1 were also conducted immediately after classroom observations. All the recordings were transcribed for analysis.

Data Information: Participants

The main participant in this study was a Japanese student (J1) who had studied English at the English Language Centre of an Australian university for approximately one semester. I chose J1 as a core participant because, having faced difficulty learning English myself, I felt understanding J1's interactions in the language learning classroom might also provide further insight for teaching in EFL classrooms. J1's educational background in Japan included studying English with a teacher-centered, grammar-based approach. While J1 may have had sufficient English proficiency as a result of her past experience, she was new to an English-learning environment and English-focused study. The teaching methodology was based on Feez's (1998) learning cycle and genre teaching approach with collaborating language learning. Learners experience the following cycle: reading and analyzing texts, group discussion, presentations, and reproducing text. Therefore, in Australia, as a newcomer, J1 needed to learn the rules of community participation that shaped her new context. J1 admitted to having become an experienced learner by the end of this research period.

Data Analysis

This section begins with a discussion of the interviews and J1's analysis, considering the extent to which she was conscious of her own growth and increasing community involvement.

Then, a macro-level of analysis of J1's self-reflection interview is conducted. Finally, the RU analysis of J1 and her interactions with her peers offers a micro-social level view of the nature of the interactions in her classroom.

Results

Interview Analysis: Awareness of Transition from Newcomer to Experienced

J1's interviews were analyzed; they demonstrate a transformation from newcomer to experienced learner along with conscious awareness of this change. At first, J1 wanted to be welcomed by her classmates and acknowledged a gap between her previous language learning experience and her new community's expectations. After recognizing differences between herself and other members, she tried to acquire the knowledge and techniques necessary to integrate with the group. Nagao (2012) examined how J1's language features changed over the course of the semester and demonstrated how she successfully improved her participation in the classroom. For example, she said in Japan, she was used to being an experienced English learner; but in the Australian ESL class, she felt inexperienced at first, as the techniques and English skills that served her in Japan provided little preparation for the class discussion necessary in Australia. Thus, J1 found it difficult to adapt to verbal interaction between peers, and her inability to participate in discussions led to her feeling isolated. However, J1 noted that by listening to other members she acquired the skills necessary to participate in the community, feeling she had become an experienced learner in her Australian context by the end of the semester.

Analysis of J1's Self-Reflection

I examined J1's self-reflections through a macro-analysis of a unit of work over a period of 6 months. The aim of this examination was to gain a better understanding of her development within her CoP. J1's self-reflections provided a narrative account of her progress with social practices in developing writing and speaking skills through her work on an essay using authentic reading materials. J1 was required to complete the following sequence of tasks: reading tutorial, text summary, text seminar presentation, individual presentation, and an argumentative essay. Some of J1's learning features and how they developed are explained below; they represent social practices in the CoP to which J1 belonged.

Social Practices as Seeking External Help

J1 read the text summary assignment article three times. She asked her host sister to check her notes. Her lack of confidence motivated her to ask her host sister to proofread it.

I was not sure whether I understood the article well so I asked my host sister to help me reading and check my notes. If I did not understand the article well, it will be a problem because I have to give a small presentation in the reading tutorial. (personal communication, 27 Nov 2007)

J1 wanted to clarify her questions concerning the article. She summarized each paragraph to better understand it. When J1 encountered sentences that she did not understand, she asked for help to identify particular words. For example, she would ask her host sister, "What does infertility treatment mean?" and "Could you explain what this sentence means?" When responding to J1's questions, her host sister recontextualized the vocabulary into everyday speech, thus J1 was able to understand the meaning of the sentences through these interactions.

Visiting someone to ask for external help can be a form of social practice, which created the opportunity for J1 to belong with another CoP. While J1 was unable to understand the sentences in the article by herself, by working with her host sister, she could recontextualize the written text into spoken text, thus enhancing her learning. Through this, J1 learned new ways of organizing meaning-making processes in her target language.

Social Practice as Proofreading

One of J1's new methods of organizing the meaning-making process in the target language was to work with a proofreader.

I asked my host sister to check my English in the essay before I submitted it. She said she tried to keep my writing and changed only my grammatical mistakes. But when she started to correct my grammar mistakes she sometimes changed my entire sentence. I found many grammatical and word choice's mistakes in my writing. To talk with her is very helpful for me because she taught me proper language choice (personal communication, 27 Nov 2007).

Asking someone to proofread can be a social practice because "the proofreading process [is] a constant conformation with one reader's meaning making operation" (Teramoto & Mickan 2008, p. 52). J1's host sister tried to respect J1's lexical and grammatical choices. However, those choices were, at times, incorrect. Therefore, the host sister modified and paraphrased some of the sentences in her essay to improve intelligibility. J1 was satisfied that her written sentences became more comprehensible to her readers. For example, at first she tended not to use causative verbs such as *make* to express the idea that a person requires another person to do something. Her host sister encouraged J1 to use *make* as a causative verb in her writing, which gave J1 the

feeling of writing more easily understood sentences. After J1 discussed this with her host sister, she realized that the majority of her notes were written verbatim from the article and it was necessary to change them into her own words. She thus came to understand the benefits of recontextualizing the formal written language of the article into everyday speech in order to explain the content of the article to peers in the classroom. Using everyday speech rather than technical language was a better method for J1 to help her listeners understand her explanation.

Rhetorical Units Analysis

This section explains the results of applying rhetorical units analysis to the data gathered from J1's interactions to examine how J1's language features changed during the semester. J1's language changes imply that she shifted from a new to an experienced learner in classroom CoP.

This analysis focuses on one text in particular that is part of a longer discourse in which a newcomer (New) and two students (J1 and M) discuss some features of an authentic art review for an oral presentation. When the data were collected, it was the newcomer's 3rd week of studying in the English Language Centre, while J1 and M had been in the program for about 7 months.

As J1 was a relatively more experienced learner compared with the newcomer, I expected her rhetorical activities would tend to consist of higher mental functions than those of the newcomer. To illustrate RU analysis in detail, eight kinds of RUs have been identified in the students' verbal interactions in this extract, reflecting a cline from lower to higher mental function: action, commentary, observation, reflection, account, prediction, conjecture, and generalization (Figure 3). The following descriptions provide examples of how the students engaged in different types of rhetorical activities, from lower mental functions to higher ones.



Figure 3. Summary of the Discourse: J1, M, and New Students' Interactions in RUs (Adapted From Wake, 2006, p. 208).

Starting from the right of the scale, or higher mental functions, a generalization unit is an example of an RU. The function of generalization is to “mak[e] class exhaustive reference to whatever class of entity” (Wake, 2006, p. 217) and is considered a higher mental function. For example, in messages 179 and 181, M explains that Aboriginal paintings are currently very popular, a generally true fact, not simply the student’s own experience (Extract 1).

Extract 1 RU generalization

176. M maybe after the exhibition sell
 177. J1 sell
 178. M yeah
 179. M usually usually people now now a day
 (RU: *Generalization*)
 180. New um-hum
 181. M Aboriginal painting are very famous

Overall Analysis of Rhetorical Activity

In order to identify differences in rhetorical activities between the newcomer and the more experienced learners, their messages during peer discussion were compared.

Table 1 shows the new student used fewer varieties of RUs than J1 and M. For example, J1 employed five types of RUs including observation, reflection, account, conjecture, and generalization. M employed an even wider range of RUs, from action to generalization. In contrast, the new student’s rhetorical activities included a narrower range of observation, reflection, and account. One way to account for this difference is that J1 and M had attended the English course for approximately 7 months, and thus they were more experienced learners than the newcomer, which allowed them to use more strategies more comfortably.

One supposition according to the theoretical model was that a large number of lower mental functions such as action and commentary would be found in the newcomer’s utterances, but the newcomer instead appears to have used middle level mental functions such as reflection and account rather than low level functions (Table 1). Furthermore, the experienced learners did not restrict themselves to higher level functions, but appeared to use the full range of functions available to them (Table 1). This indicates that rather than new learners using lower level functions and experienced learners using higher functions, experienced learners may instead have a greater ability to choose from a variety of rhetorical activities, from lower to higher, while newcomers are restricted to fewer rhetorical activities.

Table 1. Number of RUs Used by J1, M, and the New Student

RU type	Experienced students			New student
	J1	M	Total	
Action		2	2	
Commentary		2	2	
Avocation				
Observation	6	3	9	1
Reflection	1	3	4	2
Report				
Account	1	7	8	2
Plan				
Prediction		3	3	
Conjecture	2	1	3	
Recount				
Generalisation	1	2	3	
Principle				

Discussion

J1 had acquired the necessary skills to be able to use the appropriate social practices to make sense of what she was learning through interactions with other group members. Results from J1's self-reflections indicated that she applied the hypothetical process to become an experienced learner as a result of being exposed to a variety of social practices. Initially, J1 became self-aware of her role as a peripheral participant when joining the community. As a new member, she felt that she needed to be accepted by other members during verbal interactions. She followed the same procedures that the majority of students adopted in order to complete tasks such as reading authentic

articles. However, that learning process proved inappropriate for J1. As a result, she discovered her own strategy by asking for extra help from others to finish the reading assignment, showing how she tried to discover appropriate processes to enhance her language learning, processes that are themselves a social practice. Hence, she performed both the role of peripheral and active participant and increased her participation during peer discussions in the classroom community. Meanwhile, when new members joined her classroom community, in interacting with the new group, J1 gradually acknowledged that she was no longer a newcomer, which increased her confidence as an experienced learner (personal communication, 3 Feb 2008). Furthermore, in classroom discussions at the end of the semester, she could respond to another student's question during peer interaction, engaging in coparticipation to help the new student. Thus, accepting the new learners enabled J1 to recognize herself as an experienced learner rather than a peripheral participant.

Furthermore, while the new student used lower or middle level mental function RUs, such as observation, when engaged in verbal interactions with peers, the experienced learners used not only higher levels of mental functions such as generalizing, but also lower level functions. This means that experienced learners may have a greater ability to choose semiotic resources such as lexicogrammar and semantics, indicating that degree of experience in the classroom community influences conversation strategy choice.

Conclusion

Community building and community participation are natural processes, and the concept of CoP is not limited to English learning. People in communities negotiate, interact, and work together towards the same goal. In language classrooms, learners participate at different levels. Newcomers, as peripheral participants, are less skilled than experienced learners.

To become more experienced, they need exposure to a variety of social practices through working with other members. The social practices central to J1 becoming an experienced learner in her classroom community shows language learning education should be viewed through a participant metaphor rather than a knowledge transmission metaphor.

Comparing J1's contributions to those of her newcomer peers through classroom discourse and RU analysis suggests that J1 has become more experienced and has a greater ability to choose proper semiotic resources such as lexicogrammar and semantics. On the other hand, the new student tended to use lower or middle level mental function RUs such as observations. This indicates that after 7 months in this classroom, J1 had become a core or active participant in the classroom community. Moreover, the self-reflection analysis allows understanding of how J1 changed psychologically from an LPP to a full member.

Many issues regarding CoP emerged from this observation and analysis but could not be discussed in detail because this study consisted of short-term classroom observations. One main issue relates to student development from new to full classroom community member. A long-term study into learner development as community members would further enrich the findings presented here.

Bio Data

Akiko Nagao (MA) is a contract lecturer in the Language Education Center at Ritsumeikan University. Her research interests include the sociolinguistics of language learning and teaching.

References

Bell, S. (1998). Self-reflection and vulnerability in action research: Bringing forth new worlds in our learning. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 11, 179-191.

- Chapman, A., & Pyvis, D. (2005). Identity and social practice in higher education: Student experiences of postgraduate courses delivered 'offshore' in Singapore and Hong Kong by an Australian university. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 25, 39-52.
- Cloran, C. (1994). *Rhetorical units and decontextualisation: An enquiry into some relations of context, meaning, and grammar*. Monographs in Systemic Linguistics, No. 6.
- Daudelin, M. W. (2003). Learning from experience through reflection. *Organizational Dynamic*, 24(3), 36-48.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Boston, MA: Heath.
- Feez, S. (1998). *Text-based syllabus design*. Sydney, Australia: Macquarie University.
- Gee, J., & Green, J. (1998). Discourse analysis, learning, and social practice: A methodological study. *Review of Research in Education*, 23, 119-169.
- Guzdial, M., & Tew, A. (2006). Imagineering inauthentic legitimate peripheral participation: An instructional design approach for motivating computing education. In *Proceedings of the Second International Workshop on Computing Education Research* (pp. 51-58). New York: Association for Computing Machinery.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning. In H. Mori (Ed.), *A sociocultural analysis of meetings among Japanese teachers and teaching assistants* (pp. 9-15). Adelaide, Australia: Adelaide University.
- Hyland, K. (2012). *Disciplinary identities: Individuality and community in academic discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Knobel, M., & Healy, A. (1998). *Critical literacies in the primary classroom*. Marrickville, Australia: Primary English Teaching Association.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lemke, J. (1995). *Textual politics: Discourse and social dynamics*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Luke, D. (1993). Charting the process of change: A primer on survival. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 21, 203-246.

- Mickan, P. (2004). Teaching strategies. In C. Conlan (Ed.), *Teaching English in Australia: Theoretical perspective and practical issues* (pp. 193-214). Perth, Australia: Curtin University of Technology.
- Mickan, P. (2006). Socialisation, social practices, and teaching. In P. Mickan, I. Petrescu, & J. Timoney (Eds.), *Social practices, pedagogy, and language use: Studies in socialization* (pp. 7-23). Adelaide, Australia: Lythrum Press.
- Mickan, P. (2013). *Language curriculum design and socialisation*. Brighton, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Mickan, P., Lucas, K., Davies, B., & Lim, M. (2007). Socialisation and contestation in an ESL class of adolescent African refugees. *Prospect*, 22(2), 4-24.
- Nagao, A. (2012). Meaning-making process in a classroom community: How newcomers become experienced learners through interactions. *The Japan-Britain Association for English Teaching Journal*, 16, 95-106.
- Takagi, K. (1999). Identity construction in legitimate peripheral participation theory. *Bulletin of the Center for Educations of Children Overseas Tokyo Gakugei University*, 10, 1-14.
- Teramoto, H., & Mickan, P. (2008). Writing a critical review: Reflections on literacy practices. *Language Awareness*, 17, 44-56.
- Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Original work published 1934)
- Waguri, M. (2010). Reflection and learning: Fostering reflective learning in Japanese higher education. *National Institute for Educational Policy Research*, 139, 85-100.
- Wake, B. (2006). *Dialogic learning in tutorial talk: A case study of semiotic mediation as a learning resource for second language international students* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/40128/1/02whole.pdf>
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A quick start-up guide*. Available from www.ewenger.com/theory/start-up_guide_PDF.pdf
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A quick start-up guide*. Available from http://www.ewenger.com/theory/start-up_guide_PDF.pdf