
Point–Counterpoint

Limits to Communities of Practice

Communities of practice (CoP) are a mechanism through which knowledge is held, transferred and created. Although the concept has become influential it has also been the subject of extensive criticism. The aim of this PCP is to reassess the contribution of the CoP approach. The papers identify new challenges for CoP research and application.

In the first paper, Roberts critically explores the CoP approach to managing knowledge and its use among management academics and practitioners in recent years. In so doing, Roberts aims to identify the limits of the approach in the field of knowledge management. After providing a brief description of the CoP approach, she reviews critiques of the approach evident in the management literature. A number of further challenges are then elaborated. These critiques centre around the notions of power, trust and predispositions. Roberts then identifies several further challenges for the CoP approach comprising issues relating to size and spatial reach, where the notion of CoP is heading in the context of wider social notions of community, and the role of CoP in rapidly changing market environments. The limits of CoP are then discussed in relation to the societal and organizational contexts in which they are applicable. Roberts also suggests a need to focus more on the ‘Practice’ aspect than on the ‘Community’ dimension.

In the second contribution, Handley, Sturdy, Fincham and Clark explore the CoP concept from several perspectives. First, they consider the perspective of the individual learner, and examine the processes which constitute ‘situated learning’. These processes involve participation, identity and practice. Second, they consider the broader socio-cultural context in which CoP are embedded. They argue that the cultural richness of this broader context generates a fluidity and heterogeneity within and beyond communities. Finally, they argue that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish conceptually between the terms ‘participation’ and ‘practice’ because of occasional duplication of meaning. They propose a refinement of the definition to allow for greater conceptual clarity. Interestingly, they suggest that the site for the development of identities and practices is not solely located within a CoP but in the

spaces between multiple communities. They also suggest a need to consider more nuanced notions of participation as a means to enhance understanding of how individuals negotiate their engagement with CoP.

The Editors

Copyright of *Journal of Management Studies* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.