

## **Reflection paper: Problem Based Learning**

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On November 3, Kevin Shanley and I presented articles on two major themes; situated cognition and community. There were two articles by Wenger detailing the topic of community and how to create a community of practice, and then Lave and Wenger discussed apprenticeship, and finally Bereiter discussed situated cognition. These articles seemed at first to be separate topics, but the connection between them grew as the articles were read and studied. As the ideas took shape, it became more apparent how all articles could be worked into a single discussion.

### **Planning**

Before the presentation, Kevin and I planned out a division of labor, with each of us focusing on two articles, and planning accordingly. We both would be prepared with both sections, however, to offer backup and support to the other presenter. At first, Kevin had selected the articles covering situated cognition, as he had recently had discussions in other forums on the topic. As we both read and planned, he found his interests growing more toward the topic of community, and so we worked both of our ideas into a discussion.

Next we considered a direction from which we could approach the topic. As we both were fascinated with the concept of a community of practice, the idea of in-class communities seemed logical. This would serve a double purpose. It allows for small discussion groups, and yet also provides a brief simulation of a real-world community.

### **Questions and Preparation**

I have learned that people often read articles, but don't always see how the readings apply to their individual situations. Many times, readers will not conduct an internal dialogue while reading, and therefore miss some subtleties in the text. I realize fully I'm exposing my own learning biases, but I do believe the most meaningful discussions and learning come from being in a situation, and so this is why we created the four groups for the classroom.

The groups consisted of an office, a classroom, a neighborhood committee, and a family. Each group had to determine how that group would be run. Using the two Wegner articles as a guide, each group was then prompted to answer questions about its organization. Each group was given identical questions to answer. (See attached sheet for questions)

While these printed questions were to get the conversation flowing, they would not be the limit to the discussion. After the small groups discussed their individual questions, as a larger group, we would spend more time on situated cognition and the apprenticeship sections. Hopefully this would lead to the input of more insights from class members. I was hoping that the conversation would take off from there, but by using the questions as a guide, it could be directed appropriately.

### **How Did It Go?**

Overall, I think it went fairly well. The small group discussions went very well. Each group had its own flavor, which was part of the intent, and all groups seemed to have some good insights as they discussed their organizations. I was interested to hear the points brought out. Some groups, like the family, seemed to be only loosely tied together, while the neighborhood council seemed the most defined and exclusive. The discussions stayed on task in all groups, and some approached the questions as an assignment, while others saw the questions as a way to define themselves.

When we went into the large group discussion, I was hoping that some of the groups would share their insights with the larger group. Perhaps the questions weren't pointed enough at that point. Instead, we launched into discussions about exchanges of ideas, bringing in the Lave and Wagner paper on apprenticeships. We were a

little short on time as we approached the Situated Cognition paper, but we tried to include the topics into the rest of the discussions. This was a little bit of a time management issue.

### **Changes on the fly**

There was a little bit of confusion between Kevin and me as to how we would start. As we discussed last-minute preparations, we had slightly different expectations as to what would happen, and so when I found I was going first, I thought Kevin meant the part I had planned. While the individual group discussions took place, we had a chance to figure out where our communication had gone awry. We were able to get everything back on track. Otherwise, we were prepared to adapt to the class, and so we had built-in chaos tolerance.

### **Steering the Conversation**

Honestly, I was hoping for more excitement and interest in the topic. The documents were interesting to me, but it's one thing to enjoy a reading, and another to get a conversation going. In the small-group discussions, the discussions progressed from the paper, and flowed easily. The one exception seemed to be the "family" who all tend to be non-talkative, but with a little prodding, they had some good conversation as well.

When everyone came together in the larger group, the conversation seemed to lull a bit. Small groups work much better. I was hoping that each group would want to express what his or her group did together, and apply it to the topics of situated cognition and apprenticeship. Some seemed interested in sharing, but others became silent. The conversation had to be prodded to get going, but it did seem to go well.

### **Productive tangents**

I was interested in the amount of time spent on the discussion of the family. Is the family a community of practice? Interesting question. I think it can be. I don't know that most families are, but I don't know if most classrooms, businesses, or neighborhood function as communities of practice either. This is one question I encountered in the reading, but was fascinated in how interested others were in the same question. I wish that a more in-depth discussion could have ensued, more probing, but I thought that this tangent was great. It got more people thinking about what it means to be a community of practice.

### **If I Had a Do-over...**

If I were to do this over again, I would make it less complicated. I think in the first section, the part where people worked within small groups, too much time may have been spent on less-important questions. While these paralleled the articles nicely, it may not have been the most effective use of time. I wanted people to extrapolate more, and see how this applied to various groups they belong to. I purposely chose family as a community of practice to get people to ask questions they may not have considered. I don't know that enough time was given to these questions.

I would also talk with Kevin more about how we were going to use our time. We played it by ear, and it seemed to work, but it could have been better. Even more time spent in the planning phases would have made me more comfortable with our time management within class. I think we made it work, but it would have been even better if we had more practice. I suppose you can't solve for every parameter though.

I think if I were to do it over, I would also divide up the groups within the classroom. People ended up working with people who were very similar to them. Some groups ended up being almost monolithic. I would have made sure a variety of people ended in each group.

### **Conclusion**

I really enjoyed the readings, and found the discussions interesting. I liked listening to the small-group discussions the most. There was much more that could have been discussed, but it was a good start. I hope it gave the rest of the class more to think about, and made the readings more meaningful.

## Appendix: Questions

### Communities of practice: Group 1 -

You all work in the same office. (You can decide what the business is if you like.) Assign roles within that context and consider the following questions:

Part 1: According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice involves mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. How will your community define and develop these?

1. How are members of your community mutually engaged? For example, what do they do together? How is the atmosphere established? How are community member's differences respected? How are relationships fostered? What negative traits are likely to exist along with the positive in this environment?
2. How is the joint enterprise defined? For example, where does the overall goal come from? How are positions defined? How is control negotiated? How do all members show accountability to each other? How is this allowed to change with time?
3. What is the group's shared repertoire? What verbal and nonverbal cues are common? What is allowed and disallowed communication? What symbols are used? How do these things change with time?

Part 2: As laid out by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), there are seven principles for cultivating communities of practice. Explore how your community utilizes these principles.

1. Design for evolution.  
(How does your community adapt?)
2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives.  
(How does communication take place internally, and how is outside info assimilated?)
3. Invite different levels of participation  
(How is involvement level allowed to change depending on interest?)
4. Develop both public and private community spaces  
(What is allowed to be communal and what is personal?)
5. Focus on value  
(How is the value of the individual, the idea, and the community as a whole maximized?)
6. Combine familiarity and excitement  
(How does the community have stability and dynamism?)
7. Create a rhythm for the community  
(What rhythms occur within your community, and what are the results?)