Introduction

Organizations are creating a paradigm shift in their view towards employee-work relationships. Several learning organizations are developing a community of practice as one way in which to value the employees’ contributions to the organization. Brown and Duguid, (1991) discuss this paradigm in work practices. For years, canonical practices have occupied the thinking in organizations. Canonical practices are those practices that have been created by organizations. They are the established rules around which an organization performs and are considered genuine practices. Brown and Duguid (1991) further indicate that the canonical practices of organizations view work as performing a job according to a job description. They note that learning in work is an occupational necessity. When a work issue arises, then learning occurs to solve the impending problem. It seems that no other learning needs take place because canonical practices view work as a job description, where learning is not on the agenda. As social sciences become more prevalent in learning organizations, the paradigm in organizations seemed to have shifted to include the use of non-canonical practices.

Non-canonical practices are those practices that are not created by the organization, but created in the organization, by people. According to Brown and Duguid (1991), the use of narratives is the primary source of non-canonical practices. Narratives aid in diagnosing problematic situations, and help to accumulate wisdom inside the organization. Perhaps the most important use of narratives is that they enable the organization to see how complex tasks can be broken down into individual parts. From this experience a causal map can be created to show the flow of work practices. Narratives are usually collected collaboratively. Individuals give input about the best practices for specific problems that have occurred in the organization. A
collective understanding can then be developed for use in the community. This can then leads to collaboration within the organization.

Collaboration and the use of non-canonical practices help the organization to gain a shared understanding of what the work practices are for the organization. Brown and Duguid (1991) add that collaboration is what builds the constructed identity of the employees. This leads to communities within the organization that are non-canonical, informal groups that are created by the workers. Liedtka (1999) says that “Communities of practice evolve, they are not created...They exist in the minds of their members in the connection that they have with each other and with the larger institution in which they reside (p. 3)”.

The questions of what communities are and why they are important in learning organization will be addressed in this paper. A section on how to build communities is also included. The final discussion will include the ramifications of community on learning organizations. These are important issues that need addressing as we see a paradigm shift in thinking about the best practices in learning organizations.

What is Community?

Community can present itself in many ways. Some examples include interest groups, support groups or service groups. Whatever the intentions are for becoming a community, there are shared characteristics that all communities have in common. These are as follows:

- **Shared interests**: Groups of individual come together for a shared purpose or a shared interest, such as book clubs, gardening, or parent-teacher associations.

- **Support**: Groups of individuals come together to give each other support. In this way a common shared interest can be developed in collaboration with other members of the group.
Common cause: What holds communities together is the common cause that brought them together in the beginning.

Shared responsibility and resources: Communities work together for a common cause. They pool their resources and share the responsibilities in order to complete that common cause.

Shared values and beliefs: This is the most essential part of communities. Members of community come together with shared values and beliefs and develop this part of community in order to reach the common cause.

Many communities are founded on the above characteristics, but it is the *individuals* that make up communities. Every member of a community brings a unique set of attributes to that community. Then, members strive to develop a shared value and belief collaboratively from those unique attributes. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998) define community as an ecosystem where “diverse individuals live together in ways that support both the individual and the entire system “(p. 10).

Community arises because of the conflict between the need for individualism and the need for relationships. Scott M. Peck (1993) indicates that community occurs when groups come to accept every voice within that community. That is when the real work can begin.

Stereotypical communities are those in which people are in close proximity and share time together based on their commonalities. Community, however, can extend worldwide. Ulrich (1998) shows how community extends the boundary of proximity when community building is based on values. He draws on six practices for this to come about:

- Forge a strong and distinct identity: Communities of values have a clear, strong and distinctive identity that gives meaning to members and distinctiveness to non-members.
Establish clear rules of inclusion: Communities of value have demarcations that determine what is in and what is not.

Share information across boundaries: Move information, which makes a best practice on one site transferable to another.

Create serial reciprocity: Repaying the service done to you by helping others, not necessarily by directly repaying the person that helped you.

Use symbols, myths, and stories: This aids the community to feel familiar with one another.

Manage enough similarities: This creates predictability through the use of familiar settings (p. 157-163).

An example of a community of values is the McDonalds’ Corporation. McDonalds has many local operations. Each local organization operates on a standard set of values put forth by the McDonalds’ Corporation. Because the value standards are set by the global McDonalds and then filtered down to the local McDonalds’ organization, the community can extend to every location in the world.

Why Do We Need Community?

People form and participate in communities to meet various needs. Communities meet the need for socialization, by alleviating people’s loneliness and isolation. Whitmyer (1993) says we need the deep connections that community brings to diminish loneliness and isolation. According to Peck (1993) although we are created to be individually unique we need community for sustenance, company, and to create meaning to our lives. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998) note that community provides a level of stability, develops talents, and that individual
capacities are extended through community. An example that comes to mind is a youth group from a church organization. The members are connected to each other through shared values and beliefs. They meet on particular days to discuss whatever issues may be brought up. They can develop talents through organizing functions, and extend themselves throughout the community by creating meaningful common causes.

What Makes Community Work?

Overall, what makes community work is that each member in the community needs to develop a balance between individualism and community. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998) stress the need for satisfying individualism and the need for community. If a balance is not reached then there is a possibility of one need being more important and overshadowing the other. Therefore, balance between the two needs is crucial to making community work. Within the balance there are other elements that make community work.

Most basic to successful community is the willingness of the members involved to commit fully to the group. According to Holloway (1993) community members must subscribe to a belief that sustains and unites them in crises and dissention. Whitmyer (1993) says, “The key to turning your contact with people into a sense of connectedness is the effort you are willing to make for it to happen” (p. xxi). In addition, he indicates that it takes skill to build strong community. Included in those skills are communication, listening, dedication, cooperation, and leadership.

Fickeisen (1993) proposes several skills for keeping community together. He notes that successful communities honor the uniqueness of their members. Uniqueness may include strengths, motivations, phases in life, personality types, and learning styles. Effective
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Communities also respect different roles within the group such as leader, gatekeeper, and summarizer. Through his observation of nineteenth century communities, Holloway (1993) gathers that one important ingredient of successful community is frequent meetings, where morale is kept high.

Scott M. Peck (1993a) shows how the stages of community building make community work.

In pseudocommunity, members operate according to rules of etiquette. They are polite, agreeable, and tolerant. No one wishes to create dissention in the group. Once individual differences are encouraged and expectable, groups move into the second stage of community development, chaos.

In the chaos stage, the members begin to disagree with individual differences. Members want the individuals to come to the community with one set of norms. But whose norms? In this stage individual differences are in the open, and members try to obliterate these individual difference. In order for groups to proceed from chaos to community they must go through the most crucial stage of community development, emptiness.

In the emptiness stage people empty themselves of barriers to communication such as expectations, preconceptions, prejudices, ideologies, and the need to control. This is where the real work begins and community can finally develop (pp. 12-15).

Peck (1993b) indicates that the key to making community work is “soft individualism”. “Soft individualism” is a concept that allows member to share their weakness, incompleteness, imperfection, and lack of wholeness and self-sufficiency with others. Because of this soft individualism, members recognize their interdependence with other individuals, making community possible.

How do we Build Communities in Organizations?
Lave and Wenger (1991) define a community of practice as “An activity system about which participants share understanding concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their community (p. 98)”. Liedtka (1999) extracts meaning from Lave and Wenger’s ideas to define a community of practice from a business standpoint.

Thus, to see a business organization, as a community of practice is to see it as held together by a shared concern for both the outcomes it achieves for stakeholders (be they customers or shareholders) and the personal development and learning of its members. If fact, it sees these two as inseparable, in increased capabilities at the organization level flow from development at the individual level. The business organization as community of practice is process focused at a systems level. The quality of what they do is fundamental to that for which it stands. That is, the work itself matters. Agreement around the how of process and the why of purpose are the foundations of their shared meaning. Informed dialogue is central to a view of business as a community of practice, and because meaning, purpose, and learning is tied to the doing, everything of importance that happens is personal, and hence, local (p. 3).

Liedtka (1999) looks at five individual themes that have shaped the community building in organization. These themes are, organizational learning, collaboration, participative leadership, quality reengineering, and strategic thinking. Within each theme, she discusses the importance of each in the context of building community.

Organization Learning:

- Mastering Senge’s five disciplines: (a) systems thinking, (b) personal mastery, (c) mental models, (d) building shared visions, and (e) team learning.
Collaboration: Crossing boundaries within and with out the organization. Collaboration creates most advantageous way to look at the processes and outcomes instead of the pieces.

Participative leadership

Deming’s idea of Total Quality Management; empowerment, collaboration, and cooperation.

Reengineering:

Hammer and Champy’s idea that change occurs when the focus in on the basic work process, rather than that departmental or hierarchical boundaries surrounding that work process.

Strategic Thinking:

Mintzberg, Stacey, Hamel and Prahalad idea that planning should encompass the large picture of where the organization is headed and the connection between the past and present of the organization. Strategic thinkers embrace risk taking and tolerant of mistakes. (p.4-6)

Liedtka takes each of these themes and creates converging themes to develop a framework for a community of practice. These converging themes are as follows.

A shared sense of meaning and purpose that flows from the personal to the organization, rather than one that is imposed from the top down. Members of such organizations are not motivated primarily by self-interest, nor do they see their self-interests at odds with that of the community.

A view held by each individual of themselves as embedded with a larger system of value creation for customers, along with recognition of the dynamics and interdependencies with that system. Outcomes are important, and the outcomes of a central focus are those that the system as a whole produces for the customer.

An emphasis on business process, rather than on hierarchy or structure boundaries, takes on fewer consequences.

A developmental focus, at both personal and organizational levels. This perspective sees continuous learning and growth of the individual as the cornerstone of the growth of corporate capabilities.
A capacity for dialogue is perhaps the most striking chord across the themes visited. This implies openness to sharing one’s thoughts, a willingness to listen and understand the perspective of others, and to challenge one’s own, as well as other’s thinking. This includes an ability to use conflict productively and to seek better solutions than to debating existing alternatives. Talk is fundamental to the development of individual and organizations, and to the creation of shared purpose and meaning.

Local decision making that is appropriate located in the hands of those with the perceptive, information, and ownership of the relationship is key. Above all else, work is personal, and meaningful relationships evolve out of personal contact with specific individuals.

A sense of commitment and ownership among organizational members that include a level of trust and optimism about their relationship with each other. The commitment is to purpose and to each other; the ownership is of outcomes and the means to achieve them (p. 7-8).

To illustrate these converging themes, Marquardt (1996) discusses Whirlpool’s value statement. Each of the converging themes from Liedtka can be seen in Whirlpool’s value statement, that reflects a community of practice:

We the people of Whirlpool, aren’t “in” the company, we “are” the company. As such, we recognize our individual responsibility to assure our collective success by practicing and promoting the following value:

- Business with integrity: We will pursue our business with honor, fairness, and respect for both the individual and the public at large.

- Quality as a Quest: Success depends on our ability to deliver a level of excellence respected by all who rely on us.

- Customer as focus: We will dedicate ourselves to anticipate the changing needs of our customers and to create innovative and superior products and services.
Commitment to the Common Good: We will serve responsibility as members of all communities in which we live and work, respecting cultural distinctions throughout the world.

Power of trust: A mutual and inspiring trust, nurtured by honest and open communication and equal opportunity, should unite our actions and relationships with one another…providing a foundation for teamwork, confidence, and loyalty.

Learning to Lead: Our competitive edge in the marketplace ultimately depends on how our skills and expertise measure against the world’s best

Spirit of winning: At the heart of the company values lies a company spirit. It encompasses the determination, resourcefulness, boldness, and vigor by which we work (p. 116-117).

Clearly, Whirlpool as adopted Liedtka’s converging themes into a cohesive framework for a community of practice. The image of a stone being thrown in to a pool is reminiscent of the next step in community building. In order to expand the circle of community beyond the organization, inclusion of the community must be developed.

Marquardt (1996) emphasizes the benefits of involving the community as part of the learning process. These benefits include:

- The enhancement of the company’s image in the community.
- The generation of greater community interest in working for or buying from the company.
- Strengthening of the quality of life in the community.
- The preparation of a future workforce.
- The opportunity to exchange and share community resources. (p. 112).

Marquardt (1996) elucidates on four ways in which to involve community in the organization. These include:

- Encourage and Enhance Customer Participation in the Organization Learning by sharing information with customers to obtain their ideas and inputs, and thereby lean how to continuously improve services and products.
Provide Education Opportunities for the Community by allowing members of the community to participate in corporate training, tutor in the classroom, or hold jointly sponsored learning events.

Build Long-Term Learning Partnerships with Vendors and Suppliers by allowing them to give input with new ideas, resources, and information.

Maximize Learning from Alliances and Joint Ventures, will lead to the opportunity to acquire valuable learning (p.126-127).

Transformation change is created when organizations look at the possibilities beyond the canonical viewpoint of established rules in organizations. Creating communities where people are empowered to collaborate and cooperate is fundamental in creating change in organizations today.

What are the Possible Ramifications for Building Community?

According to Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) there are five possible ramifications or “dark shadows” to watch for when building community: the harmony trap, the equality trap, unresolved family projections, hidden agendas and power plays, and split between task orientation and process orientation

Harmony Trap. Something that occurs quite frequently in communities is the assumption or belief that everything is in perfect balance. A community that relies on the harmony can become fixated and will be unable to deal with anger, fear or depression of its members. This could lead to attrition or a slow breakdown of the community. It is through the member emotion that stems build and maintain balance.

One way of preventing the harmony trap is to recognize conflict as something that is necessary within an organization or community. “Conflict serves to establish and maintain the identity and boundary lines of groups (p.234)”. Adding phrases that include conflict into the vision statement will help members understand that conflict is expected. If a community is falling into the harmony trap, it is best to bring the group together and discuss, in a non-
threatening manner, what is happening and possible solutions. Every member should have a voice in the recreation of what is expected within the community.

Equality Trap. Much like harmony, equality is a fluid state. There is not a group that continuously shares power equally for more than a few second or minutes. It is through ones’ strengths that one finds power.

To help a community steer clear of this trap, they must come together and discuss power and responsibility. It is important to give everyone a voice, listing his or her strengths and weaknesses. Give the knowledge that power will change continuously based on needs of the community is not bad.

Unresolved Family Projections. This ramification arises when leaders become personally involved in other member’s lives.

For example, if a leader of a company is the caretaker of the employees, he/she knows every issue within employees lives, the employees begin to look at him/her as a ‘father/mother figure’ and depend upon them to make things right when the community is faced with issues such as lay-offs or decline in production. The individuals within the community will look for the leader to make things right. Communities with this issue should work on detaching themselves from depending on one leader or individual. To prevent this from happening again, the leader role should be a rotating role, this will help individuals to remember that they are responsible for themselves.

Hidden Agenda and Power Plays. This ramification happens when individuals within communities use that environment for their own growth. They will use the community environment to also following their own agendas, try to gain power or take over, and then will deny what they are doing to other members. This often destroys corporations by two groups forming and one side gaining control.
To help prevent hidden agendas and power plays communities should come together biannually, one meeting to reaffirm the vision statement and the other meeting to reassure that the work in process is working for the vision. At the meetings, talk should be about what is being learned both organizationally and individually. Developing communication and training in conflict resolution will also help the community avoid the hidden agendas and power play issues.

**Split Between Task Orientation and Process Orientation.** In communities there are two types of workers: The processors and the doers. While everyone understands the significance of both, sometimes it is hard to understand why they are so different in the approaches.

This normally causes a split in the community where one group feels they are not accomplishing what is necessary for them to stay within the community, while the other group does not understand the rush to complete something without thinking it through. In these cases, communities need to provide feedback to all members of why processors need the doers and the doers need the processors. Often this is accomplished by creating a false emergency, in which both sides will be utilized as a team.

Communities also need to reflect on being overly task oriented. The organization can help prevent the split between the processors and the doers by creating an atmosphere where both are equally important. Recognizing problems and solving them together, retreats and team building exercises are all good tools in brining the task oriented and the processors together (pp.232-242).

**Conclusion**

As organizations begin to understand the importance of community within their industry, they are making a paradigm shift in their thinking about what communities can bring to the
workforce. Community can create a non-canonical approach to learning that will enable workers to feel productive in their fields. Communities make people feel a shared sense of togetherness, based on a common purpose. They create the paradigm shift for organization to recognize that top down management is being replaced by empowered individuals in the organization. Liedtka demonstrated that the new models for thinking about organizational learning are designed to create community. The correlations that she draws reflect the shift that is already in practice in many organizations.
References


