

**Inquiry that Resituates Communities of Practice:
A Relational View of Organizing, Power, and Possibilities in Situated Learning**

Earon Kavanagh, PhD

University Canada West Business School

Lecturer on Organizational Behavior, Sociology, Psychology

earonkavanagh@gmail.com

<http://www.earonkavanagh.ca>

In this article I provide an approach to communities of practice (C-o-Ps), as learning communities in which we engage in joint actions of knowing to add value to our lives and organizations. The central project of a C-o-P is the sharing or management of knowledge. Lave and Wenger, the originators of the concept (1991), did not include an analysis of power relations, and in fact stated that such an analysis was needed. In my PhD research with Taos Institute faculty, I placed this need front and center, and discovered that professionals trained in group human relations such as laboratory learning, fared well during periods of social drama and group conflict in C-o-Ps. This article also centers critical relational (social) constructionism, which proposes that we create and develop our organizational realities through joint actions of language in localized settings. This line of thought can be considered in the stream of what is now being referred to as the New OD.

Introduction and Background

My PhD research, which was supervised by Taos Institute faculty and defended at Tilburg University on November 25, 2008, further developed our understanding of communities of practice (C-o-Ps), by introducing into the literature a discourse on power relations. I realized that for C-o-Ps to be more productive as human fields for generative knowledge they had to be fulfilling for participants. Attention would have to be placed on human relations: what is produced relationally, in addition to knowledge and/or products. With the idea in mind that relations are produced by joint action, I sought to develop a model of C-o-Ps that included human relations, and therefore power relations. With the evolving trend toward organizationally sponsored C-o-Ps, this was important, and such developments can now be considered as a new frontier for OD practice and theory building.

I had noticed from experience that most breakdowns in C-o-Ps had to do with the breaching of taken-for-granted conventions, often by newcomers, and how such breaches were responded to. I had already determined that most organizing, learning and leadership occurred in language practices (Kavanagh, 2002). I noticed that interpersonal conflicts emerging in C-o-Ps were not unlike those which we work through in human interaction labs, and that such conflicts involved various forms of expressed power.

To further explore power relations, I selectively sampled professional communities as case studies. These communities emphasized personal development, had training in human relations, and valued the “use of self” as a principal tool for change. Thus, to build a model of possibility in C-o-P learning relations, I sought to learn from the practices of human relations experts. I therefore placed my focus on the language practices of family therapists, OD practitioners, and social workers doing team-based change efforts with families. These practitioners integrate the “use of self” as the central relational force around which all “big” interventions and “little” interventions are organized. Transformation, should it occur, is a product of the joint action of self and Other.

Lave and Wenger’s seminal book on situated learning and communities of practice (1991) ignored power relations; the authors openly admitted this: “in particular, unequal relations of power must be included more systematically in our analysis (p. 42)”. I set about filling the gap provided by Lave & Wenger, and noticed that follow-up literature had continued the trend of ignoring issues of power.

Understandably, those of us practicing OD and other group relations know that all human interaction involves power (Oshry, 1995). We understand that C-o-Ps and other forms of organization are dynamic fields of human interaction: e.g., devised hierarchies; places for resistance and pushing and pulling; and places for mutual influencing around resources, including knowledge (Hosking & Morley, 1991). Power flows through relations, in hierarchies and in multiple other ways. Examples of non-hierarchical organizations also exist, and ODNET, our own virtual learning community in the OD Network, is a fine example of this.

The literature continues to narrate C-o-Ps as places of situated learning, often based on a hierarchical relationship between experts, newcomers and those in between (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). For example, the case studies presented by Lave and Wenger, involve subjects drawn into the workforce with little voice or signs of personal agency: children helping their midwife mothers, young navy personnel in the lower ranks, African boys contracted out as apprentices by their parents, and a young apprentice meat-cutter, kept away from old-timers, unable to observe and learn from the skills and banter of the journeymen. The one example of a

transformational change system presents A.A. members, but they are required by the program's method of discourse to focus on their deficits rather than their strengths.

But the idea that only those constructed as “the expert” hold relevant forms of knowledge in situated learning has been usurped in at least one consulting field. For example, building on Gregory Bateson's idea of “double description” (1979), social constructionist practitioners of family therapy realized in the mid 1980's that, although a set of human relations could be perceived and narrated as “a problem” (*description 1*), there might also be “new information” that showed participants operating in a positive or generative manner, actively working to meet their challenges (*description 2*) (White, 1986). This could be termed in Bateson's perspective as *news of difference*, delivered by new information: “information is news of difference. Information does not mean anything unless it includes a difference” (1979: 227). *Description 2* stories can make a difference, but are often subjugated by the *description 1* language practice of problem construction (Foucault, 1980; Barry, 1997). Consultants and therapists periodically find that they have become participants in “problem-determined systems” focused on making interventions to solve human relations constructed as problematic (Anderson, Goolishian, & Winderman: 1986).

The social constructionist practitioners began to realize that to help client groups learn from their own generative behavior, they must help them first identify *description 2* stories. Thus, within this new way of thinking, it was determined that hierarchical approaches to knowledge which construct the practitioner as “expert”, and the client system as a lesser-knowing object needing change, limited the productivity of the consulting relationship (Atkinson, 1993; Anderson, 1997). These practitioners began to treat their clients as experts in their situations, and developed *description 2* language practices to elicit and explore such expertise and how they have been using it (Boscolo et al, 1987; Cecchin, 1992: 90). To make this shift, the practitioners had to change their assumptions about the nature of knowing, and who has access to knowing. With this shift, the meeting of the expert and the non-expert became a meeting of knowers that made meaning by exploring together the domain of the problem construction.

Practitioner assumptions around knowledge and expertise emerge in our language practices with clients, in our language practices with newcomers in our discussion communities, and in our language practices in the practice literature. Language practices socially construct frames for going forward: they can construct knowledge-relations that limit practitioner effectiveness, and language practices that emancipate the imagination (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). For example, transformation, which is about becoming, often requires language that emancipates the imagination, and makes it easy to act into the newly emerged possibility. With

performance of *description 2* knowledge or strengths, collaborative relations become stronger, more productive (Barry, 1997), and open space for transformation of both the newcomer and the expert. This is also known in the practice of appreciative inquiry (Anderson et al, 2001).

Inquiring Questions

In C-o-Ps, organizing processes occur as persons seek and are granted rights to participate, engage in power relations, ways of speaking, the relational construction of persons, knowledge relations, and more. Each of the practitioner communities examined in my research espoused to practice in a non-hierarchical manner: e.g., strengths-based practice, collaborative practice, or from humanistic values. My principal interests were

- (1) Whether the language practices of each practitioner community (e.g., its theory in use) were congruent with its espoused theory (Argyris & Schon, 1978).
- (2) What relational realities are being socially constructed by the joint action of each community? Joint action looks at relations of interdependence rather than acts or utterances of individual entities (Shotter, 1980).
- (3) What can be learned from how group practitioners in OD, family therapy and social work manage power relations in periods of conflict with each other or with the client?
- (4) What value might answers to the above (#3) have for conceiving communities of practice and enhancing project productivity, relations and learning?

Cases: Situational Descriptions

In each case, the practitioner community faced a significant challenge when one or more members breached a taken-for-granted social norm. As Turner (1957) has written, such a breach often produces a conflict, and can plunge the community into crisis, sometimes threatening its very existence. Addressing each breach resulted in community social drama, and forced the participants to reflexively examine their ideologies and their practices.

- C-o-P #1: The first case was a change project involving social work practitioners on Teamworks, an integrated change team comprised of a case manager from the child protection Service, various professionals from contracted agencies, and the client. While Teamworks practitioners espoused that their knowledge relations with clients in the Teamworks program were non-hierarchical, Teamworks had little autonomy from the Service. The Service funded them, led the change process, and had the final word in change efforts. In effect, the Service micro-managed the change process. Practitioners intended to work outside of the formal project hierarchy, but failed, unable to enact their espoused theory with the client. The usual knowledge hierarchy between client and

practitioner remained intact, and practitioners on the team, now bound to *description 1 language practices*, continued to narrate and therefore to re-produce the client as “problematic”. Issues of equal participation were not handled well.

- C-o-P #2: The second case focused on the language practices at MFTC-L, an autonomous online community of constructionist family therapists discussing non-hierarchical theory and practice. Although I spent several years participating in MFTC-L, the period of my observation and reflection was six months. The official project was the sharing of knowledge between old-timers, newcomers and those in between. During a social drama lasting roughly one week, 28 participants struggled with practice concerns and a formal hierarchy of knowledge between therapists and clients. Staying grounded with *description 2 language practices*, they worked through the struggle of allowing clients to be their co-participants, and allowed a therapy client to participate as a co-expert. Issues of equal participation were handled well, and the client, diagnosed with multiple personality disorder, became a valued contributor who employed her own knowledge as a person with a mental illness. Issues of equal participation were handled well.
- C-o-P #3: The third case focused on the language practices at ODNET, an autonomous online community of OD consultants that actively practiced having no hierarchy in its management, and professed to practice from humanistic values. Although I spent several years as a participant there, the period of observation and reflection was six months, and the official project was the sharing of knowledge between old-timers, newcomers and those in between. Clients were welcome to come and participate in discussions about OD practice, but there appeared to be no clients present. In this case, in a social drama lasting roughly one week, 28 practitioners struggled with individual styles of participation, issues of confidentiality, threats, trust, a dominating voice, and constructing social norms to make equal participation safe. Although the social drama contained moments of significant conflict, issues of equal participation were handled well.

Methodologies Employed

A critical relational (social) constructionist approach to research was used (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996; Hosking, 2004, 2007), incorporating my insights as an experienced reflective practitioner (Schon, 1991). Rather than looked at as an entity, organization was treated like a verb, undergoing continuous processes of change, processes of organizing. Critical approaches to human and organizational development assume (1) *inter-dependent ontologies rather than independent existences*, (e.g., person and organization are viewed as co-genetic or as

co-constructed); (2) language is seen as constructing social realities rather than representing independently existing realities; (3) there is a focus on *social realities that are considered to be multiple, local-historical, and made in action*. This replaces a dependence on assumptions of knowledge (objective and subjective) of some independently existing world.

The approach I used was uniquely developed over a six-year apprenticeship with the core Taos/ Tilburg research faculty, who are social/organizational psychologists. Each practitioner community was treated as a community of practice (C-o-P), organized around a central purpose/project such as professional development through sharing knowledge, or an actual change effort. C-o-P theory was used throughout the research. Each practitioner community was examined through a variety of means, including case reflection.

- (1) Initial data gathering occurred through participant observation.
- (2) In the OD and family therapy communities, texts were examined first via ethnographic content analysis, and then via discourse analysis.
- (3) In addition to the above, organizing processes were examined via critical relational (social) constructionism (Hosking, 2004; Weick, 1979; Hosking & Morley, 1991).
- (4) Power relations were examined using Foucault's perspective on power (1980). Power was defined as the capacity to act in various ways; these included mobilizing knowledge or constructions of Other in a hierarchical manner, acting non-hierarchically, and/or enacting the capacity to make a difference, lend power to, or engage in resistance. Mainstream presuppositions around power in C-o-P theory were deconstructed, and replaced with Foucault's participatory definition of power.

Critical Relational Constructionism (CRC) in Research

Although CRC is constructionist and has no formal "method", such inquiry often places theoretical discourses into relation with each other: and is considered by some as seeking to "overcome representationalist epistemologies" (Schwandt, 2000); CRC does seek to introduce other lines of thinking, other experiences, other versions of the world into a dialogue. CRC can be considered as a postmodern form of inquiry, in that it tends to "search out and experiment with narratives that expand the range of understanding, voice, and the storied variations of human experience", including "redressing power imbalances". (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). CRC can also be considered as a postmodern approach to organizational science: seeking to "emancipate the imagination", to "tell it as it might become" rather than "telling it like it is"; and this includes opening space for dialogue (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996). CRC approaches to inquiry can be considered interventional rather than descriptive: making space for multiple

voices, it represents a shift to possibilities and appreciation, and demonstrates sensitivity to multiple possibilities in relations of power (Hosking 2007).

Reliability and Validity

The methodologies used can be considered within a post-positivist naturalistic paradigm for research. Following are some points addressing these areas.

- Credibility (internal validity) was achieved by prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation of the data using the 3 theoretical lenses as methodologies (Lincoln & Guba, 1984). Both the original text and analysis was presented, so that readers could evaluate their accuracy (Potter, 1996). Being constructionist, it also welcomes reader disagreement as a means toward generating dialogue.
- Transferability (generalizability/ external validity) was achieved by means of rich and thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1984), and analytical generalization of cases to the 3 theories used (Yin, 1994).
- Dependability (reliability) was achieved by means of an audit trail of data and analysis techniques and software used; also employed were “author reflection” boxes throughout the dissertation, containing notations of my own impressions and decisions throughout the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1984).

Findings

My findings, framed within a relational perspective, included the following, mostly centering the value of autonomy and non-hierarchical practices in C-o-Ps as ways that enhance productivity in developing knowledge relations:

- It provided a resituated understanding of C-o-Ps: as human systems with a wide range of power relations.
- It provided evidence (in group conflicts) that the theory in use of OD practitioners and constructionist family therapists is congruent with their espoused theory.
- It resituated C-o-P newcomers as owners of their own expertise; when space is made for the expression of such expertise they become ideal partners in collaborative learning for old-timers and those in-between.
- It provided best practices, perspectives and tools grounded in the case studies, for enhanced ways of collaborating in C-o-Ps using non-hierarchical means.

- It ratified concerns by Brown and Duguid (1991) and Brown (1992) that C-o-Ps, to successfully produce knowledge in relations, should be allowed to flourish with little interference or bureaucratic contamination by sponsoring organizations.
- It produced an enhanced understanding of the ability of autonomously organized groups to work through group conflict and develop as learning organizations in such processes.

Implications for Further Inquiry

While there are many implications that stem from the above findings, a core area for further inquiry revolves around autonomous C-o-Ps and those sponsored by organizations. The above findings indicate initially that autonomously organized C-o-Ps in which members have training in human relations, fare better through periods of conflict, and as organizations that learn from their own group processes.

New opportunities for research could occur in C-o-Ps that develop in organizations. These C-o-Ps may or may not exist autonomously and may encounter challenges as they develop their knowledge relations. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) suggest the potential of such C-o-Ps as innovators and stewards of organizational knowledge, and that a key to cultivating such C-o-Ps is to first recognize that they exist (2002: 24-27): within business, across business units, and across organizational boundaries. They can emerge spontaneously or be intentional, be unrecognized by an organization, or be incorporated into the official structure of the organization.

Implying the value of autonomy, Brown and Duguid (1991) note that both canonical (formal) and non-canonical (informal) knowledge can simultaneously exist in organizations. In non-canonical knowledge, stemming from autonomous interaction, stories “act as repositories of accumulated wisdom”, and construct a “shared understanding” by workers. They discuss how, through autonomy, local knowledge and procedures develop to address problems whose solutions lay “outside the directive training and documentation provided by the organization”. Given that these forms of wisdom are often developed through autonomous interchanges, Brown and Duguid suggest that organizational support of such C-o-Ps should not be intrusive, and they should be allowed to “shake themselves free of received wisdom”.

Further research can continue to investigate the efficacy of C-o-Ps that are autonomously organized, contrasted with those organized without autonomy. Following Brown’s reasoning (1992), existing autonomous C-o-Ps within organizations could consider potential pros and cons of being institutionalized. For the corporation, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) suggest

that cultivating communities of practice in strategic areas is a way of managing knowledge as an asset, as other assets are managed.

When we consider power relations, an important consideration is whether institutionalization of autonomous C-o-Ps will lead constituents to experience “contamination” and compromise autonomy to bureaucratic values and practices. Bureaucratic contamination from the sponsor organization is what occurred with Case #1, on the social work change project. The other C-o-Ps were free to improvise, develop as self-organized systems, congruently incorporating their C-o-P practices with their espoused theory. Another consideration is that of conflict, power and group process. The three case communities all experienced significant conflict and struggle to resolve it, and this indicates new opportunities for OD practitioners in such areas as group process consulting with knowledge management C-o-Ps fostered by large organizations.

An important reflective inquiry for C-o-P participants in these settings might be whether they will be able to continue to develop and change, and form their own knowledge relations autonomously, work through conflicts, and therefore reap the value of non-hierarchical joint action as they autonomously develop and change.

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