

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE - First experience from the European Project PALETTE

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Abstract

For more than ten years, Communities of Practice (CoPs) have been recognized as effective environments to support learning by professionals, organisations and educational institutions. Collaborative learning is inherent in such communities, in that their members learn from each other by making their knowledge and practices explicit, sharing them with their peers, and reflecting on them. This panel aims at discussing the interaction between learning processes and Communities of Practice, along three dimensions: (i) studying learning processes in CoPs; (ii) using Communities of Practice for fostering, sustaining and tutoring authentic learning activities; (iii) including Communities of Practice awareness in training to foster the further building of Communities of Practice.

The panel will start with a short presentation of some findings of the European Project PALETTE (for Pedagogically sustained Adaptive Learning Through the exploitation of Tacit and Explicit knowledge), an Integrated Project of the Technology Enhanced Learning initiative (sixth framework). These findings will be exemplified by a few representatives of CoPs involved in PALETTE. Then the panel will open the discussion for panelists and attendants being able to share their own experiences and opinions.

Communities of Practice

For more than ten years, Communities of Practice (CoPs) have been recognized as effective environments to support learning by professionals, organisations and educational institutions. Collaborative learning is inherent in such communities, in that their members learn from each other by making their knowledge and practices explicit, sharing them with their peers, and reflecting on them.

CoPs have several characteristics that distinguish them from other organizations and learning situations. They are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic (the *domain* of the community), deepen their practical knowledge and expertise in the area under consideration (the *practice* of the community), and interact on an ongoing basis (the *community* itself).

CoPs often *emerge* in the context of existing organisations or professional networks, in which people are already involved in common professional practices. Throughout their *life*, CoPs elaborate current (or develop new) practices, through debates and exploration of internal and external knowledge. The *evolution* of CoPs leads to either their expansion (regarding their domain, their practice and, their community members) or to their disappearance, or may encounter cycles of alternate growth and slow down.

The learning value of a CoP is of high importance. The underlying processes of social participation, community building, development of identity, learning and knowing are articulated around negotiation of meaning, which is at the base of any individual and collective learning. The interacting processes of *participation* and *reification* are fundamental to the CoP

functioning. Participation means being active participant of a social community and constructing an individual and a community identity; reification is the process "of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into thingness".

More and more CoPs use virtual environments to support their activities. However, despite the rapidly increasing potential offered by technologies (including web-based platforms, wireless communications, mobile devices and extensive use of multimedia contents), recent research underline the lack of adequate scaffolding in the form of both technical supports and usage of the technology to:

- express, represent and share practices and authentic problems
- debate and reflect about the practices and about the life of the CoP
- develop, reify and exploit knowledge inside and outside of the CoP
- facilitate engagement, participation and learning

The European Project PALETTE

PALETTE (for Pedagogically sustained Adaptive LEarning Through the exploitation of Tacit and Explicit knowledge) is an Integrated Project of the Technology Enhanced Learning initiative (sixth framework). It is a three years project; it gathers 13 partner institutions and started in February 2006 (<http://palette.ercim.org>).

The main goal of the PALETTE project is the facilitation and enhancement of both individual and collective learning through Communities of Practice (CoPs) - frequently interacting groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in that domain. Empowered by the appropriate use of networked applications and advanced technologies, CoPs have the potential to become a fundamental ferment for the deployment of learning environments that support professionals, organisations and individuals in the future. Cross-fertilizing pedagogical and technological researches, in order to elaborate, implement and, validate new learning environments, enhancing knowledge building and sharing in CoPs, are the main challenging issues addressed by the PALETTE project.

To reach this goal, a participatory design approach has been adopted for the development of a *palette of services* to improve efficiency of CoPs' member practices, in terms of:

- Expressing, representing and sharing practices as well as authentic problems
- Debating and reflecting about the practices and about the life of the CoP
- Developing, reifying and exploiting knowledge inside and outside the CoP
- Facilitating engagement, participation and learning

PALETTE is working with thirteen Communities of Practice as full actors in the participatory design process. These communities belong either to the learning-teaching domain or to business related domains.

Learning in, with and for CoPs

This panel aims at discussing the interaction between learning processes and Communities of Practice, along three dimensions:

- Studying learning processes in CoPs to enhance the understanding and improve the efficiency of Life Long Learning: learning might be something radically different depending of the learning situation during one's life. Learning at school, in the University, in vocational programs, or at the workplace mobilize different kinds of scenarios, different activities, different evaluation process, and answer to different motivations. Embedding "real life" situation in academic learning, relying more strongly on team work in classrooms, multiply blended learning situations were participants are alternatively in class, on professional sites and at distance, rethinking pedagogical processes both in initial, vocational and continuing education in order to develop common features and common environments could be a step taken to facilitates the creation of life-long learning processes
- Using Communities of Practice for fostering, sustaining and tutoring authentic learning activities: when it happens that a Community of Practice (CoP) exists for a given job, it may be of great value to have the teaching/training interact with the CoP. For example, students may be integrated in real activities - like knowledge reification processes in the CoP – and learning activities may be based upon real life case studies tutored by CoP's members. Students and CoP's members are joining in collaborative activities which then may benefit to both.

- Including Communities of Practice awareness in training to foster the further building of Communities of Practice: including the awareness upon the advantages of CoP building and animation in the training of future professionals might be a good way of promoting the role of CoPs in professional life and improving their functioning.

The panel will start with a short presentation of some findings of PALETTE, exemplified by a few representatives of CoPs involved in PALETTE. Then the aim of the panel is to open the discussion among panelists and attendants, in order to share their experience and build new knowledge about learning processes and Communities of Practice.

Panelists

The panel will gather professionals and researchers engaged or interested in discussing these aspects of Learning in, with or for Communities of Practice. The panel is welcoming IADIS e-learning conference participants who would like to share their own experience in these areas.