

# INTERCULTURAL LEARNING AND COLLABORATION ASPECTS IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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**Keywords:** Communities of Practice, Social media, Intercultural learning, Disabilities.

**Abstract:** Communities of Practice (CoPs) and intercultural learning are approaches empowering people with the skills and knowledge needed to turn change to an advantage and to help them to integrate in social life. In this paper we firstly discuss CoPs to support learning, sharing, transferring and developing knowledge and then present some statements for building CoPs based on Social media and using intercultural learning. We give examples of projects where we develop CoPs and present some conclusions.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Groups of people coming together to cooperate, share knowledge and learn more informally from one another face-to-face and virtually in a community are becoming increasingly important for individuals and organisations. Examples are Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 1998) researched by many authors. Practitioners and people are held together in a CoP by a common interest in a body of knowledge and are driven by a desire and need to learn through practice and social participation, to share problems, experiences, insights, templates, tools and best practices. One important aspect is that in some cases different cultural backgrounds of participants could affect the learning and collaboration within CoPs. To tackle interculturality in such cases requires taking a step from cultural incompetence towards efficient application of cultural knowledge, awareness, sensitivity and competence that is necessary for professional practice (Kramsch, 1993). Achieving intercultural competence by using intercultural learning is a systematic process about understanding different cultures with their differences and similarities and is required to moderate learning and collaboration in CoPs.

Internet and Social media i.e. media for social interaction, based on Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) have a vast potential to create prospering environments for emerging virtual CoPs (VCoPs) allowing learners to engage in intercultural communication and to achieve intercultural competence. Social media tools can help to create a more dynamic community of

practice and provide an ongoing and searchable conversation approach to benefit others.

Wild et al. (2002) show that eLearning is an important tool that can support knowledge development particularly in CoPs (Barnard et al., 2000; Hamburg, 2010).

In this paper we firstly discuss Communities of Practice and then present some statements for embracing interculturality in CoPs by using intercultural learning. We give examples and present some conclusions. The target groups of the two projects we present as examples are people with disabilities. Results of studies and other our projects show that they have needs to collaborate and communicate helping them to improve their life (Hamburg and Ionescu, 2009).

## 2 CoPs

CoPs are networks of individuals who share a domain of interest and knowledge about which they communicate (online in the case of VCoPs). Informal learning occurs more frequently in CoPs than formal learning and according to Lave and Wenger (1991) this involves "the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice".

CoPs are particularly important for people with special needs. Many learners with disabilities need continuous learning opportunities and in a community and help; this could be realised by a combination of formal and informal education methods (in-

cluding different cultural evenings, social activities, health services, etc) (Hagiwara and Myles, 1999).

Through informal connections and learning in their CoPs, members acquire social capital, which gives value to individuals and to the group.

In a CoP, members share information, which is boundless; they learn how to converse theory into practice. CoPs help participants to bridge the gap between tacit knowledge (How) and explicit knowledge (That) (Duguid, 2005). This means the emphasis from the abstract bodies of knowledge taught in formal education shifts towards “situated learning” that occurs as people engage with real-world problems (Fox, 2000).

The design of CoPs is also important. Some principles of “designing for aliveness”, followed in some of our projects which can guide organisations wishing to start a CoP are (Wenger et al., 2002):

- Design for evolution,
- Keep an open dialog between inside and outside perspectives of the CoP,
- Consider different levels of participation for the members of the CoP,
- Develop public and private community spaces,
- Create a rhythm and rules for the community.

The use of eLearning 2.0 in CoPs improves the ability of members to socially interact with the technology used (communication with technology) (Engert et al., 2008; Beer et al., 2008). Using ICT in learning environments supporting the community afford the potential for the combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication, access to – and from geographically isolated communities (Hlapanis & Dimitracopoulou, 2007) and international information sharing.

Despite the great potential, there are also barriers and limitations particularly of current technologies in relation to virtual communities of practice. The lack of face-to-face contact within a CoP can often be an advantage, because it helps to suppress traditional group norm behaviour. On the other hand, it remains open if a community of practice where face-to-face contact is entirely excluded can be sustained over a long period. Face-to-face interaction and socialization processes consolidate the relations between members and group membership. Trust is important for knowledge sharing and development in a VCoP and this develops primarily through face-to-face interactions.

Another important barrier to VCoPs refers to selectivity in the choice of ICT to support the CoPs. VCoPs need to use Internet standard technologies such as bulletin boards and Web ones. Our experi-

ence and results of other projects show that members have difficulties often with the ICT access and ICT skills referring for example to the use of on-line forums and eLearning training. An aspect to be considered is the impact of cultural differences within CoPs particularly in virtual ones. The next part presents some statements in this context.

### 3 EMBRACING INTERCULTURALITY IN CoPs

Currently interculturality and intercultural learning receive much interest and socialisation and educational process influence the development of an own identity by people and at times shape the way we deal with cultural differences, developing a sensitivity for other cultures in a gradual process from denial to integration of differences.

Particularly intercultural problems appear in VCoPs. Because virtual community infrastructure can be set up across cultures via the Web, cultural and language differences can change interactions and hinder the flow of CoP activities. The use of technology to bridge geographical gaps can lead to a misinterpretation of messages; cues and feedback are often missing.

Culture impacts the choice of technology; it is necessary to think about which technology can be used for a certain community.

There are no universal solutions or specific rules for responding to cultural diversity in CoPs and approaching intercultural learning. This is a complicated and sensitive matter.

Some of the factors for approaching intercultural learning are the following:

- Building up confidence is important for a mutual learning process, sharing different points of view, different feelings
- Trying to understand one’s own identity
- Discerning reality in the process of cultural learning guided by respect for personal decisions, acceptance of other views, seeking reconciliation of different points of view, being conscious of own personal responsibility in this process
- Being in dialog with “the other”.
- Being prepared to break away from old beliefs, traditions and ideas
- Taking into consideration that conflict is sometimes at the heart of intercultural learning.

Intercultural dialog can be used not only to develop a sense of community and belonging in intercultural learning process but also as a tool for the prevention and resolution of conflicts by enhancing the respect for human rights, democracy and law.

Intercultural differences call for intercultural competences of CoP moderators. The role of the moderator in a CoP with many cultures is a crucial one; she/he should observe conversations, give advice and try to be a mediator between cultures. However the challenge of different cultures also affects the role of participants. They also need a good deal of sensitivity and awareness of participants prejudices (and also their own), to be prepared for collaborating with people from a different background.

Intercultural competence does not ask to behave like someone else or imitate another culture, but to learn actively about the people you are cooperating/working/learning with for effective collaboration and communication (www.uq.edu.au). One important step is to develop openness to differences for example understanding that culture is not static, that cultural context is changing. The ability to operate across many types of boundaries, real and virtual ones, is helpful. A key for developing intercultural competences is to respect and understand diversity and grounds of discrimination.

In connection with the used language to tackle interculturality in CoPs, language that stereotypes or shows bias against groups of people should be avoided. The use of inappropriate language has the potential to damage the credibility of the moderator/trainer and alienate the learners.

Social media based on Web 2.0 helps i.e. members of a CoP to work both in an autonomous way as well as collaboratively. Social media can take many different forms, including Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating and social book-marking.

#### 4 EXAMPLES

Gaining experience in the Grundtvig project BASKI (Hamburg and Ionescu, 2009) aimed at the development of a model of social basic skills for people with learning disabilities by using multimedia, we continued our work in the EU-Learning partnership Bringing New Approaches to Education of Autistic Children in Turkey and European Countries. The target groups of the project are teachers and students of vocational education, trainers working in special

education centres, social workers, parents of autistic children and last but not least children with autism. Results of the analysis carried up during the project show that there are many isolated solutions for training for autistic children but cooperation forms between trainers, social workers, parents from different European countries are missing. Now we started the development of a VCoP with trainers, social workers and autistic children recommended by trainers, doctors, not only from partner countries but also from other European countries. Access to documents, discussions and training modules for achieving social skills are supported by a Moodle-based platform (Dougiamas, 2004) because of the accessibility and flexibility of this tool.

Three online moderated Webinars using Webex to make them current, offering live interactive learning experiences in English will be organized in order to discuss different cultures in education of autistic people in partner countries and to choose best practices to put them in the project book. A special Wiki will be used for the development of the project book within the VCoP.

Another EU-Grundtvig project is about Creative learning approaches for people with disabilities by using intercultural events and environments (CLINTEV – <http://www.clintev.eu>).

This project is based on research findings and aimed at the development of informal learning sessions within cultural events that can help adults with moderate mental and/or other types of disabilities to learn basic skills and in particular communications skills.

The CoP within the project CLINTEV (<http://community.clintev.eu>, Figure 1) is developed by using the Social media tool Tiki Wiki CMS Groupware, a free and open source wiki-based, content management system written primarily in PHP and distributed under the GNU Lesser General Public License (LGPL) license.

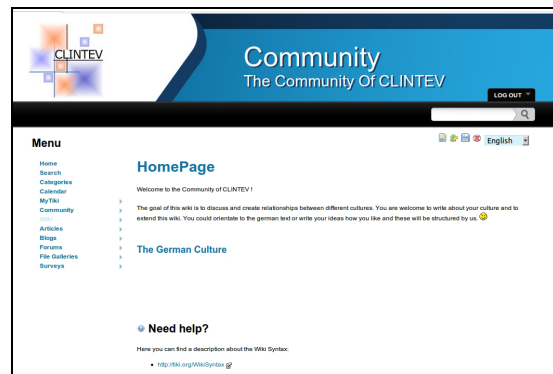


Figure 1: CLINTEV community.

The CLINTEV community offers:

- Intercultural training.
- Use of English language. Forums with intercultural topics
- Common development of learning resources by using Web-blogs.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

We advocate the importance of intercultural learning and collaboration particularly for person with autism and language disabilities to overcome their communication difficulties and to achieve social skills so this person can be included in lessons, in social and work environments. Learning in CoPs will make a positive contribution to spreading best practices and find new innovative solutions helping people with special needs. Creating efficient CoPs is a difficult and complex task and it should be supported by different national and European initiatives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The two projects are funded by the European Commission within the programmes Leonardo da Vinci and Grundtvig.

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