Connecting Collaborations with Theory

Dennis Fassing & Birte Stark

In the article *A Story on (International) Collaboration Among Peer Tutors* (Dalessandro u. a. 2015), we discussed several cases of collaboration between peer writing tutors of different locations over the last two years. Collaborative efforts like video chats grew naturally and without any guidelines based on theory. In this follow-up-article, we take up a theoretical perspective to further examine the resulting communities. We want to know in which way learning and network theories can help us to understand the dynamics of the communities and guide our efforts of creating a successful and thriving peer writing tutor community. Therefore, we use the learning theories of *Communities of Practice* (Lave/ Wenger 1991) and *Connectivism* (Downes 2012) as a framework for our discussion.

First we will introduce the concept of communities of practice with the focus on legitimate peripheral participation as Lave and Wenger claim this as a form of learning in communities of practice. Following, we will look closely at the learning theory of Connectivism (cf. ibid. 1991: 31). Afterwards we will discuss how these theories do or do not apply to our community. Following this analysis, we will draw a conclusion for the prospective approach to our collaborative efforts.

Communities of Practice

The theory of Communities of Practice (CoP) is a social learning theory (cf. Wenger 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) developed the concept of CoP out of the concept of apprenticeship which was used as a synonym to the term of situated learning (cf. ibid.: 32).

Every learner participates in a community of practitioners (cf. ibid.). They gain access to this community through legitimate peripheral participation. Lave and Wenger explain that the concept of legitimate peripheral participation

> *"provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which the newcomers become part of a community of practice."* *(Lave/Wenger 1991: 29)*

They characterise legitimate peripheral participation as a way of learning in a community of practice. Whereas the word "peripheral" does not indicate that there is a core of the community. Legitimate peripheral participation, the learning through participation in a CoP, is a way of becoming an experienced member. Members can be recognized by their participation in the community (cf. Wenger 1998: 73 f.).

Wenger describes four important parts to look at when the theory of CoP is used as an analysing tool: community, identity, meaning and practice. In the center he places learning (ibid.: 5). As a fundamental aspect Wenger describes a duality between "reification" and "participation" (ibid.: 65). If one of these aspects is locked out, it can lead to a lack of meaning (cf. ibid.: 67). Additionally he defines three dimensions of CoPs: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire (cf. ibid.: 73). In the communities it comes to practice, because people "are engaged in actions" (cf. ibid.).

The perspective opened by this concept enables a focus on the social aspect of learning (Lave/Wenger 1991: 34). The social practice becomes the important thing to look at. Lea claims that meanings, the way of constructing them and the unfamiliar interaction can exclude people (cf. Lea 2005: 188).

Connectivism

The theory of Connectivism explains how learning happens in networks. The foundation of this view is that knowledge is constructed in connections between entities, so called *nodes* in networks. People learn through interaction, by receiving and sending items and reassuring their knowledge using the reactions of their recipients. Connectivism is about context. Without it, individuals in the network would not know what is regarded to be right or wrong. Context can only be constructed in a network of connections in between nodes, such as the Peer Tutoring communities.

Downes marks four qualities for a good network. These qualities are *openness, diversity, autonomy* and *interactivity (*cf. Downes 2012: 95–109*)*. A network has to be *open* to new members, ideas and forms of presentations to create new knowledge. A closed network is "isolated" (ibid.: 97). *Diversity* is needed for different points of view on every item brought into the network. Comparison and discourse between the differing views of the nodes increase the learning effect of the network. The third criteria, *autonomy*, points out that every member of the network has its own motives. Connections between people are formed naturally if they can help each other with achieving their goals. The more autonomy a node has in its decisions of how and with whom to connect, the more variety is in the network. A good network is also *interactive*; knowledge is constructed through exchange of all its members. This way, knowledge becomes inherently dialogical.

These four qualities are dependent on each other. For example, if the factor of openness is limited and just a certain type of members is included in a network, the quality of diversity is automatically reduced, too. If there is no need to discuss critically, the amount of interactivity in the community will decrease. Autonomy is also reduced because with all members of the network sharing the same idea, it will become more likely that the same ways of thinking about the idea will be mandatory.

The key part of this learning theory is the activeness of every individual node in the network. Activity not only creates new knowledge items, it also creates response, dialogue

and criticism. Without activeness of its nodes, a network dies in a short time. Autonomy as a quality of the network hence becomes an obligation for the people in it. As they are free to work as they please, they should feel a reliability to do so. To feel this way, the community has to be regarded useful for one's personal goals.

From theory to practice

With the theories of Communities of Practice and Connectivism, we are able to think about the dynamics in our communities. Both theories contain useful elements that could be transferred into the projects. An analysis will show which elements already have been applied and which would qualify for further utilization.

The idea of the Peer Tutoring *Google+ Communities* was to gather writing center members interested in peer writing tutoring and provide them with a place to share and work on ideas. In certain ways, we wanted to have a free discussion: Not forced from an employer as worktime and not overseen by higher ranked persons of the institutions. With this focus, we tried to create non-hierarchical communities which can be seen as communities of practice. We wanted to practice our ideas which formed through our work and our training in an autonomous and open environment. There was no suppression from the writing centers. On the contrary, the idea for the community also started through the encouragement and open-mindedness of the institutions (cf. Dalessandro u. a. 2015). The interest in peer writing tutoring and the common background of writing center work are shared resources.

There were specific ideas of what could be done in a community of peer writing tutors, what topics could be discussed and what projects could be realized. Through this the above mentioned three dimensions of CoPs were brought into the group. The specific ideas and the potential are a joint enterprise, the shared resources are the common background of the participants as members of writing centers. At the beginning a group of people from different writing centers engaged with each other. It was a small CoP which brought together people with different statuses and experience. The founders of the community acted as hosts, starting discussions and calls to action, they organized the CoP through this encouragement (cf. Wenger 1998: 251). One example for the mentioned joined enterprise is the *Academic Text Talk*. This project also is an example for the duality of reification and practice which states Wenger as important for creating meaning within CoPs (cf. ibid.: 63–71).

Similarly, the members of the communities wanted to participate in the discourse of the writing center work and also create their own part of it. In this way, they worked together in a collaborative way and achieved many of the qualities necessary for a community of practice.

The active people within the communities are mostly experienced tutors and writing center leaders. Peer tutors who are less experienced often start with reading posts.

Through participation they would become members of the community. Crucial here is the mentioned criticism of Lea (2005) who sees a danger in excluding people from CoPs through the construction of meanings and unfamiliar interactions. Such unfamiliar interactions could be the acting of peer writing tutors and writing center leaders in a non-institutional and informal way. This might also create the impression that the communities are exclusive elite groups. The communities could also be seen as bridges, build from the student community to the scientific community. Wenger (1998) mentions the importance of people acting in different CoPs (multimembership) who can therefore break boundaries.

In joining *G+-Communities*, we decide for a collaborative approach on entering new CoPs. In joining together to work with each other, we experience new forms of learning. In terms of Bruffee, this is the practice of "reacculturation" (Bruffee 1999: 7), the entrance into a new knowledge community. For Bruffee, reacculturation "is probably next to impossible to accomplish individually [...]" (ibid.: 7), but gets easier by working together and "join a larger, more inclusive community of knowledgeable peers" (ibid.: 12).

Applying the theory of Connectivism, four qualities are constitutional of networks. *Diversity* comes through different peer writing tutors, working in different writing centers and therefore having different theoretical and practical background. They come from different cities and countries and combine various cultural and regional behaviours. As an outcome, *openness* comes into the projects gradually. Under the impression of the *EWCA 14* conference we experienced the benefit of connecting not only internationally, but also on a professional level with everyone interested in peer tutoring, no matter of that individual's status. Important for the openness of our networks and projects is, that everyone is willing to talk on a peer-to-peer level.

From a connectivist view, our efforts preliminary did not achieve the needed qualities. The constraint for both of this qualities is the limited number of active members, who mostly know each other from conferences and past projects. The qualities of *autonomy* and *interactivity* are connected to the restrictions mentioned above. Everyone in the communities should participate because they want to do so. Granting this autonomy in a community with just a few active members could prevent interactivity. Those who engage get a lot out of it and profit in ways of connections, ideas and information. The problem remains, that people have to be encouraged to interact first.

Focusing on the dynamics of the *G+-Communities*, the question arises, if they work as a group or rather a network:

> *"Collaboration belongs to groups, while cooperation is typical of a network. The significant difference is that, in the former, the individual is subsumed under the whole, and becomes a part of the whole, which is created by conjoining a collection of largely identical members, while in the latter, the individual retains his or her individuality, while the whole is an emergent property of the collection of individuals." (Downes 2012: 485)*

Using the theories of Downes, Lave, Wenger and Bruffee, we can summarize that the *G+ Communities* and the projects mentioned above are indeed collaborative groups and not cooperative networks. They contain certain qualities of networks, which are not yet fully implemented.

Chances and challenges of boosting collaborations

There is a low number of members in the communities of peer writing tutors acting across the borders of their writing centers. This means that there is a thin pool of people to win for collaborations to begin with. As stated, we want to connect with individuals who are interested in the topic and our ways of communication. As mentioned above, the peer writing tutoring communities are groups and not networks. This is useful for collaborations, because they naturally work better in a group environment, but it could interfere with the growth of the community.

Through the generation of content, guidance from more experienced tutors and maintained projects like the Academic Text Talk, a set of tools for collaborative work is provided. Using a theoretical foundation, this group can be a place for legitimate peripheral participation and reacculturation into the knowledge communities of peer writing tutoring and scientific research. This communities, if they stay active and establish themselves, could be a starting node into a full-fledged cooperative learning network. The interaction of individuals engaging in different knowledge communities and the diversity of their statuses is a way of keeping the group active and simultaneously establishing such a network.

Literature

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Angaben zu den Personen

Dennis Fassing arbeitet nach seinem Magisterabschluss an der Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt am Main als wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter im Schreiblabor der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn und bereitet aktuell seine Promotion vor.

Birte Stark studiert Erziehungswissenschaft (M. A.) an der Universität Hamburg. Von 2012 bis 2015 arbeitete sie als studentische Hilfskraft und Peer Tutorin in der Schreibwerkstatt Mehrsprachigkeit.