Review

Extending the analysis of organizational learning from the communities of practice

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The objective of this paper was to expand contributions of studies on organizational learning from the discussions on communities of practice. This is because the occurrence of analysis and studies on communities of practice requires a significant change in the way of observing the processes of learning and knowledge management. For that reason, initially, it was necessary to extend the considerations of communities of practice, in ways of understanding the meanders and the concepts spread on this topic. Soon after, the intention was to analyze the contributions that the discussions have on communities of practice for learning and knowledge processes in organizations to focus on attributes related to situated learning and social practices. In a third moment, the intention was to compare the discussions of communities of practice, and organizational learning and knowledge as a way to achieve the objective proposed in this paper. Finally, some conclusions elucidated the contributions which highlighted the intended purpose of this paper.

Key words: Organizational learning, communities of practice, situated learning, informal learning.

INTRODUCTION

The term organizational learning has always caused intense conflicts between scholars and researchers. On one side, those who advocate that organizations learn faithfully and are the repository of much of the knowledge generated by individuals (Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1995; Argyris and Schön, 1996). On the other side, those who defend the processes of learning and knowledge acquisition are always individuals or groups (Levitt and March, 1995; Prange, 2001).

Despite this intriguing and interesting discussion, the purpose of this paper is to go further to show that there are other aspects for analyzing the phenomenon of learning and knowledge generation in organizations. The intention is to go beyond discussions of epistemology, where the focus is to really know which entity is learning or generating knowledge. In learning and knowledge generation, what have been expressed are the formality; and more specifically, the location where learning and

knowledge becomes more explicit, if it is at the individual or group, or within an organization (Vera and Crossan, 2005).

Currently, many other theorists (Gherardi, 1999; Merriam and Caffarella, 1991; Cook and Yanow, 1996; Elkjaer, 2004; Strati, 2003; Antonello, 2011) have emphasized the informal, cultural, group and practical processes in the generation of knowledge and modes of learning. These authors have focused on more diverse forms of analysis of these phenomena (learning or knowledge) in the context of organizations.

Regarding the difference between the concepts of learning and knowledge, it is interesting to note in a traditional approach that learning is the process of obtaining knowledge, and knowledge is the ultimate result of learning. Therefore, saying "learning process" is almost a tautology, if it is the reference point for this traditional approach. Some recent authors (Elkjaer, 2004; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2001; Strati, 2003; Antonacopoulou, 2006; Antonello and Azevedo, 2011) have criticized this traditional approach, claiming that this traditional approach is schematic and categorical, given

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the difficulty of separating what is knowledge and what is learning. Moreover, these authors emphasize that there is difficulty in knowing what was really learned from what was already known.

For example, Gherard (2001) and Strati (2003) works with the concept of "knowing in practice." In another text, Strati (2007) work with the concept of "sensible knowledge" and "practice-based learning". These examples illustrate the ways in which knowledge and learning can occur in these thematic studies showing an extensive gray area between these concepts that all are distinguishable but not separable.

It is in view of this discussion that issues such as: learning in practice, knowing in practice, situated learning, informal learning and knowledge, sensitive knowledge, among others, show the emergence of an important context in the processes of learning and knowledge generation. This context is provided by the informality of learning in other ways than just the rational / pedagogical and the generation of knowledge in other ways that are not just the formality of that which is explicit or implicit (Watkins and Marsick, 1992; Livingstone, 1999; Antonello, 2011).

As individuals or organizations, learning and knowledge happen every moment, and least important in practice (this said from the logic that rational knowledge and formal features in the central organizations) and social relations, and can contribute significantly to the results of the organization (Chiva and Alegre, 2005). In this context, emerged the notion of communities of practice, to be noted, that many employees join in an attempt to improve knowledge or even to discuss the organizational practices outside the workplace.

This community of practice could be developed, for example, by a group of teachers who, after working hours, discusses teaching methods and forms of assessment adopted by each of them, as well as the political pedagogy of the institution to which it belongs. Another example occurs when some Internet users who work directly with specific software, come together to discuss and learn about the tools, possibilities and limits of the program. In both cases, there are evident contributions that can enact new practices and innovations in organizations. Such actions place the communities of practice at a level of importance relative to traditional methods of Training and Development (T & D).

In view of this discussion, the aim of this paper was to further discuss on organizational learning from the communities of practice. This is because these communities enable integration between learning and knowledge in the context of organizations. To this end, initially was a need for increased consideration of communities of practice, in order to understand the intricacies of broadcast around the concepts in this field of study. Soon after, the intention was to analyze the con-tributions that the discussions have on communities of

practice for learning and knowledge processes in organizations by focusing on attributes related to situated learning and social practices, which is one way to look at it. Afterwards, this topic was intended to broaden discussion on communities of practice to highlight the contributions to organizational learning. Finally, some conclusions can elucidate the contributions which highlighted the intended purpose of this paper.

DEEPENING THE DISCUSSION ON COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Lave and Wenger (1991) were the first authors to introduce the concept of community of practice. They described a community of practice as a set of relationships between people, activity and world in a given period of time and relationship with other communities of practice tangential and overlapping. Lave and Wenger (1991) showed that these communities' newcomers learn from older ones by enabling their participation in certain tasks. Over time, newcomers move from peripheral position to participate fully in the community.

Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) were not accurate in their definition of community of practice, getting to mention that these communities are established in the "relationship between people, activities and world." The authors emphasized that the community does not imply only a shared culture because members of a community have different interests, make different contributions to the activities and have different points of view. That is because in many communities of practice focus and the interests involved are different, even if the overall purpose is the same. Lave and Wenger (1991) notes that the idea of communities of practice involves participation in an activity system, the way the participants share meanings as they give senses to their lives and how they understand what they do.

The authors comment also that learning occurs in processes of mutual engagement between participants, in an informal and social interaction situation. Lave and Wenger (1991) focused on what they called "legitimate peripheral participation" (LPP) in communities of practice. With the notion of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), the authors outlined a way to understand the relationship between "new" and "old" members of a community. Moreover, Lave and Wenger (1991) stressed that the concept of "legitimate peripheral participation" takes into account the relationship and integration strategies developed by new participants in a community of practice.

The legitimate peripheral participation is complex in nature. Each of the three aspects (legitimacy, the peripheral region and participation) is indispensable and cannot be considered in isolation. Legitimacy and participation define the characteristic waysof belonging to

a community. Peripheral region and participation address position and identity in the social world. Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasizes the composite character of the three components of the LPP, and their inter-relationships; when new members step into a community of practice already existing: the engagement of the group, knowledge disseminated / shared members and legitimacy of the process of participation in shared meanings. New members are striving to understand the process and gain the legitimacy necessary to participate effectively in the community.

The legitimacy of a community of practice focuses on the dimension of relations of power and authority to the group. Lave and Wenger (1991) observed that the legitimacy need not be formal. This was verified in studies that these authors conducted with anonymous alcoholics, tailors, butchers and midwives; for example, to the tailors and butchers there is a degree of legitimacy that comes from the formal hierarchy and position in the organization. In the case of anonymous alcoholics and the midwives, the legitimacy would be more informal. Anonymous Alcoholics gain legitimacy when that deal stories of their experiences become more mature and closer to those that would have the oldest.

The notion of participation provides the key to understanding communities of practice, but this does not imply co-presence in a well-defined and identifiable community. However, communities of practice imply participation in an activity in which all participants have a shared understanding. The communities of practice covered a spectrum of collective action and mutual engagement by informal links. Communities and the degree of participation in them are in some senses inseparable from the practice, as will become clear later (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

However, it was not only Lave and Wenger (1991) who discussed the communities of practice. In a somewhat different thematic, Brown and Duguid (1995) took up this discussion using the example in their explanations of ethnography, developed by J. Orr, on a copier company. The emphasis of Brown and Duguid (1995) is the possibility of communities of practice pushing forward the innovation and resolutions of new problems. These authors emphasize that many models of learning such as knowledge management should not be seen as far from practical. In a traditional view, highlighting Brown and Duguid (1995), the work practice is seen generally as conservative and resistant to change. Since learning is seen as distinct from the work itself and problematic in the face of change; whereas innovation is seen as the imposition disruptive, but necessary for the change in work practice and learning. For these authors, the practice of working, learning and innovation are interrelated and complement each other, which is what drives the observation of the unification of this field of study. Brown and Duguid (1995) notes that this unification occurs through the communities of practice.

Cox (2005) states that the aspects associated with communities of practice in the text of Brown and Duguid (1995) have more characteristics of improvisation in new practices of the reproduction of existing practices, as occurred in the text of Lave and Wenger (1991). In addition, Cox (2005) stresses that discussions on communities of practice in Brown and Duguid (1995) was brought forward as harmonious commitments and did not elucidates relations conflicts and interests.

Wenger (1998) takes the concept of communities of practice, years after text he published with Jean Lave. The intention of Wenger (1998) was to elucidate and reconfigure some assumptions originally developed in the text of Lave and Wenger (1991).

Wenger (1998) seeks to highlight other important factors in discussions of communities of practice in order to explain the process of construction of identity of shared meanings, and practice itself. This is because these concepts have been little explored in the text of Lave and Wenger (1991).

Wenger (1998) seeks to highlight that the notion of community of practice emerges in informal relationships, being supported by such mutual relationships (whether conflicting or harmonious) that enable the development of practices, meanings and expressions, and constructions of identities.

Wenger (1998) emphasizes the importance of power relations, at the time that elucidates the process of identity construction in communities of practice. Despite this, the power takes a restricted setting in the text of Wenger (1998), because the power was evident in discussions about the practice and the relationships between new and old members of the community.

Although central, power relations have been neglected and marginalized in studies conducted on communities of practice. Roberts (2006) incorporates these considerations as a critical factor in these discussions. The author clarifies that understanding the dynamics of power relations is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the creation and dissemination of knowledge in these communities. Roberts (2006) says that in communities of practice, members are diversified in terms of the experiences, ages, abilities, personalities and authorities.

The author shows the power capacity or ability to obtain things, through the influence of strength or control. The theory of communities of practice has much to contribute in discussions about learning and knowledge in organizations, even with this gap in discussions of power relations (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1995; Wenger, 1998; Cox, 2005; Roberts, 2006). Another fact is that theories of communities of practice underwent significant changes in order to understand or view the processes of learning and obtaining knowledge, emphasizing informal and shared knowledge, which is located in certain practices. These contributions will be treated subsequently.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND THEORIES OF SITUATED LEARNING AND SOCIAL

The situated learning theory was developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) with the intention of emphasizing the occurrence of the learning processes in social practices of engagement and symbolic exchanges. The idea of Lave and Wenger (1991) was to go beyond limited conceptions that observe this process only as learning in practice or formal transfer of knowledge. These authors point out that the theory of situated learning, function as a critique of cognitive theories of learning. The authors' intention was to question the assumption that teaching based learning "classroom" is more effective than learning in informal communities. For Lave and Wenger (1991), the idealization of cognitive classroom is based on an assumption of positivist abstract knowledge, where knowledge is valuable because it reflects an objective reality and can be manipulated.

Lave and Wenger (1991) propose a community of practice as an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge. According to the authors, the learning takes place in these communities not only as a restricted situated learning where examples of the practice are simply replicated, but the learning is by legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). LPP is not only situated in learning in practice, but in the learning as an integral part of the practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) stresses that the notion of peripherality does not constitute a physical concept that relate to the position in the core or the periphery, much less the simple measure of the amount of knowledge that has been gained. The authors use the terms "periphery" and "full participation" to denote the degree of engagement and participation of individuals in a community.

Before exploring the concept that Lave and Wenger (1991) provide for situated learning, it is necessary to conduct a raid on the work of Shivastava (1983), to understand the evolution of the term organizational learning. Thus, the author notes there are four dominant conceptions of organizational learning. The first is that organizational learning enables the necessary adaptation to environmental dictates in a world with constant changes. Shivastava (1983) seeks to elucidate this concept which is expressed that learning enables control through prevention or prediction. Shivastava (1983) points out that the second conception points to the ambiguity between organizational learning and learning organizations, emphasizing that both individuals learn in organizations, how organizations learn through individuals. The author shows that the idea is that organizations have knowledge beyond those individual, as well as individuals have knowledge beyond those of the organization. Shivastava (1983) noted that the third view now called knowledge management assumes that organizations have and develop skills that are transferable, consensually validated and distributed in the

organization. Shivastava (1983) showed that this design knowledge is able to promote competitive advantages and strategic choices, because they are seen as intangible assets of the organization. The fourth and final design points for learning through experience, in that a repetition of work improve increasingly employee performance. Therefore, experiments should be relevant and transferable.

Shivastava (1983) showed that the similarity is the idea of searching on improving performance and results, just as learning and knowledge, although intangible, are rational and widely thought, used and transferred. These views present in the text Shivastava (1983) show that for a long time the concepts of situated learning, communities of practice, sensitive knowledge, among others, were extremely marginalized. Until the 1980s, these concepts were marginalized because they could not guarantee results or improvements in organizational performance. This is because the organizational learning scholars believe that these issues were irrelevant to their content interpretation, and are localized and informal. This is clear in the work of Gherardi et al. (2007), reiterating that the focus of these scholars for many years, engendered a blindness to the whole experience which was not related to instrumentality, rationality and utilitarianism.

From the 1990s, some scholars (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991, Watkins and Marsick, 1992, Cook and Yanow, 1996) began to realize that much of the knowledge and learning generated in informal settings also produced positive and negative results for organizations. In this line, another theme is deconstructed, that these processes allow only positive factors. Furthermore, as shown by Gherardi et al. (2007), attention was focused on observing that knowledge is not what is in people's minds, but what people do together. Another factor that has been detected at this time, visible in the text of Cook and Yanow (1996), is that organizational learning is an action, and so little can be seen narrowly as learning of individuals or organizations. This is because learning is not linked to what the organization chooses to do, but is part of what the organization is, of what the organization that produces and reproduces. In this context, the notion of practice is central.

The idea of practice was taken up by several authors, (Raelin, 1997; Gherardi, 2001; Strati, 2003; Elkjaer, 2005) forms and different perspectives, such as practice-based learning or work-based learning, communities of practice or communities of practical knowing in practice, among others. To Gherardi (2001) and Strati (2007), in between these various conceptualizations of practice, two thematics are central. The first thematic refers to the practice as an activity and performance in organizations. The second thematic, which encompasses the first, says the practice is what allows the shared meanings and also results in production processes. Thus, this second issue,

the practice, not only produces knowledge and work, but also reframes the symbolic attributes shared in society.

In this context, the discussion that arises is termed Knowing, as a way to establish two important deconstructions. The first deconstruction is that knowledge is in the minds of individuals and thus can be transmitted, stored and appropriated by other individuals. This thematic is directly linked to a cognitive perspective, where knowledge has an existence previous to the act of knowing. The second is on deconstructing the idea that knowledge is an asset or a factor of production. This thematic is directly linked to the context of a knowledge economy and knowledge management. The deconstructions made from the concept of Knowing about these two thematics are: the practice is not tied to a perfect knowledge and rational [Simon (1995) had already pointed out on the bounded rationality in organizational learning processes] and knowledge is not external to individual, but is produced in the interaction between subject, object and context.

Moreover, while the traditional idea has a lot of knowledge repository and static, Knowing is inherently dynamic and provisional. Therefore, Knowing is not used in action, much less capable of the action, but the action itself. Thus, the Knowing is an act of knowing and a subject-knowledge, where learning and knowledge are seen as practical activities and accomplishments that people do together. The Knowing is being built and rebuilt all the time, because it is directly related to doing. For this to occur, the Knowing is produced locally, emerging situated and active (Weick, 1995; Gherard and Nicolini, 2001; Gherard, 2001, Strati, 2003; Elkjaer, 2005; Antonello and Azevedo, 2011).

This amplitude evident the concept of Knowing provides important findings on communities practice, for example, the dissolution of the frontier of learning and knowledge. for this subject and intending to extend these findings is that it is important to deepen in the next section the contributions of communities of practice for organizational learning and knowledge management.

EXTENDING THE ANALYSIS OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING FROM THE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice arise from this emerging context, and are situated and active. The communities of practice become ways of "knowing" which are defined through social communities and individuals the skills of members. The powers are manifested and never identical, because the members have life experiences that differ from those experienced in the communities. This analysis shows an important point and is consistent with the term situated learning, in that there is always a space for expression and generation of Knowing from themes and shared goals (Gherard and Nicolini, 2001; Gherard, 2001; Strati, 2003; Elkjaer, 2005; Gherard 2005; Gomèz et al., 2007;

Antonello and Azevedo, 2011).

Wenger (2003) points out that those systems of situated learning and social occur through three modes of belonging. The first is the engagement, where people do things together, talking or making artifacts. The second is the imagination, from which emerge the images that subjects create them yourself, the community to which they belong and the world itself. This imagination is the basis of guidance, reflection on the situations and exploring possibilities. The third is the alignment in the sense that the activities that are aligned in a shared environment with other processes have an effective addition to simple entanglements. Therefore, says Wenger (2003), the concept of alignment is not used and does not indicate a one-way process, where members must be aligned to an external authority. The alignment is a mutual process of coordination, interpretation and action in the sense that the major goals are realized and shared by all.

Wenger (2003) uses these three modes belonging to two reasons. The first reason is that each of these three terms (engagement, imagination and alignment) allows for different contributions to the formation of the apprenticeship system and also the social construction of identities. The author says that engagement, imagination and alignment are in coexistence, but in different systems of social learning they can stand each other or be combined for an overview of each system. The second reason is that each of these modes of belonging (engagement, imagination and alignment) requires different types of work. Wenger (2003) noted that in the case of a work where the engagement is essential, what is required is that the members develop their activities together. This differs from a job where the imagination is central; because what is required is that the members have certain distances of shared situations for a better reflection. Thus, these three modes belonging can be, in many cases, conflicting. For example, spending some time thinking can affect engagement and vice versa. Wenger (2003) noted that the three modes of belonging will always exist in communities of practice, even with potential conflicts.

Wenger (2003) says that human beings have always formed communities that reflected in their collective learning. These communities can be seen, for example, in the tribes that lived in caves around the fire, in a group of nurses in the fields of war, in a street gang, or in a community of engineers interested in developing a new car designer. Thus, this author points out that living in communities of practice is essential for learning to occur. In this line, Wenger (2003, p. 80) conceptualizes communities of practice as building blocks built into a system of social learning that serve as containers of social skills that make up the system. These skills are defined by the three modes of belonging (engagement, imagination and alignment). Therefore, communities of practice promote inter-relationship between required

skills and experience in mutual engagement between individuals, and are able to sustain the bonds established between new and old members (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Still, communities of practice promote innovations important and necessary to the organizations (Brown and Duguid, 1995).

This discussion brings out that communities of practice effectively contribute to the manifestation of Knowing and also the social processes of situated learning, as evident in the work (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1995; Gherard and Nicolini, 2001; Strati, 2003; Elkjaer, 2005). This finding demonstrates the importance of these studies as part of organizational processes. The organizational learning and knowledge take peculiar forms in the context of communities of practice and situated learning and social practices, where the emphasis has been: organizational practices (Gherard 1999; Gherard and Nicolini, 2001; Elkjaer, 2004), experiments and experiences (Raelin, 1997), informal actions (Watkins and Marsick, 1992), social relations in communities (Brown and Duguid, 1995; Fox 2000; Wenger, 2003), and shared situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

With these considerations, one arrives at the threshold of this discussion, which was intended to show some contributions generated from the discussions of communities of studies in organizational learning, leaving only some conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this paper was to expand contributions of studies on organizational learning from the discussions on communities of practice. This is because the occurrence of analysis and studies on communities of practice requires a major change in the way of observing the processes of learning and knowledge management. Thus, the emergence of ideas about communities of practice took place in informal settings, beyond organizational boundaries, not being driven by organizations, as these communities are part of everyday actions of individuals in society. Thus, Wenger (2003) points out that communities have occurred in the history of societies, that is, the tribes who lived in caves, gangs are currently circulating in the cities. This discussion is that it is necessary to emphasize that communities of practice can never be confused with teams or working groups, because the latter are driven by the organization and the first formations are beyond organizational boundaries, people who have interests in certain subjects or goals, as has been noted.

Therefore, to observe the existing contributions in studies of communities of practice, another view is needed on the processes of learning and knowledge in organizations. Thus, the processes of organizational learning and knowledge take place in informal practices, situated and social engagement, and belonging to a social group. In this social group, existing symbolic exchanges generate knowledge and learning, allowing constant changes and mutual recognition among members of those communities in which they act. In this line, the practices of learning and knowledge should never be seen or only related to instrumentality, rationality and utilitarianism. Much of what was learned or known as an agent in communities of practice provides meaning and identity attributes that are perceived or known through other mechanisms, for example, senses and body. Therefore, in the context of communities of practice, the view that learning and obtaining knowledge happen so streamlined and formally, is limited to confiscation of other important factors that are the social bases of human existence, as the need to establish relationships, to communicate, symbolize things and ideas, among others, that create the necessary directions to the shared information. These attributes, marginalized in studies of organizational learning and knowledge, is visible in discussions of communities of practices and systems of situated learning and social practices, so is the importance and contributions of these thematic studies.

Despite some problems encountered in discussions of communities of practice, some authors performed analyses in order to contribute to these discussions, as is the case of power relations, which have been marginalized within communities of practice, and also the route developed by this paper provides the necessary contributions. The fact is that the way that scholars on communities of practice and situated learning and social practices analyze these phenomena contributes greatly to new perspectives and new visions that are created, thus increasing the understanding of the phenomenon of organizational learning.

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