



GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Travelstories.gr/Community as a Community of Practice

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1. Travelstories.gr/Community as a Community of Practice

1.1 Introduction

Learning collaboratively describes a diversity of educational practices in which interactions among peers create the most important factor in learning (Dillenbourg *et al*, 2009). Computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) could be characterized as a pedagogical approach in which learning takes place via social interaction through the Internet. A more informal method of learning through CSCL is the asynchronous communication tools (forums) which give to many people the opportunity to participate in forums and exchange knowledge expertise in a big variety of aspects. These virtual communities could have different characteristics from the traditional communities (Palloff and Pratt, 1999). On the one hand, virtual communities use the Internet to establish collaboration across different geographical places and time zones. On the other hand, traditional communities are situated in a specific place and have their norms. One major difference is that “*virtual communities exist according to identification to an idea or task, rather than a place. They are organized around an activity, and they are formed as a need arises*” (Johnson, 2001, p.51). There is not a distinction between virtual communities and traditional communities if they both have elements of “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998). Nevertheless, there is a distinction between designed communities, such as virtual and communities of practice (CoP) as the last ones emerge from the design community (Nachmias *et al*, 2000; Wenger, 1998). However, virtual communities have fundamental elements that are especially encouraging for CoP to emerge (Johnson, 2001).

Stemming from that, this assignment aims to identify which of these key characteristics of the theory of community of practice could emerge in the particular online space with domain: www.travelstories.gr/community. Travelstories is a forum, where one can find mainly information about travels. This information emerge mostly through personal experience. Travelstories’ philosophy is to help each member of the community to learn information for their destination of interest. At this point is seems worth mentioning that the particular forum characterizes itself as “*community*”:

“Travelstories is the largest travel community - forum in Greek internet. We are a large group of people who love traveling, sharing personal travel stories, and exchange information for future destinations.”

This seems to be in line with the following definition of Wenger for the Communities of Practice “*In a nutshell: Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly*” (Wenger, 2011 p.1). According to theory, a vital element for a community of

practice to emerge through virtual communities is the underlying task-based learning (Johnson, 2001). In the specific case of Travelstories one who has already traveled somewhere shares his story in this forum in order to help other members in their travels.

Stemming from this, more in depth analysis will follow since CoP is a complex theoretical concept that cannot only be explained by this brief definition. The virtual communities have many characteristics similar to CoP but Wenger has not defined them strictly. More particularly he does not mention whether the lack of some of them can prevent the rise of a CoP or whether this absence can make it less productive in terms of learning. Subsequently, issues about the three dimensions of CoP (*1. Mutual engagement, 2. A joint enterprise and 3. A shared repertoire*) will be discussed.

In order to do that, I received permission from the administrator of the forum Travelstories about using some of the results of a research which he conducts every year from the years 2014 when the forum had more than 1000 participants and from 2013 when there were approximately 900 ones. In order to participate in the research one should be a member of the forum. The current members of the forum are 22.485. A limitation of this research could be that since it is being conducted in only one week duration probably the majority of the respondents could be the most active members of the forum.

2.2.a Mutual engagement

Mutual engagement is a vital dimension of CoP which means that practice does not exist in abstract terms but in terms of actions whose meaning negotiate with one another (Wenger, 1998). In this forum discussion with several people takes place in order to shape a common understanding of a place. Except of discussion for a theme, the users can also write their own stories for the experience that they had during their travels. So, with different stories for the same place the users' knowledge is being shaped. In mutual engagement, both the diversity of the practitioners and the homogeneity could increase the productivity of the users in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). In this forum the female participation is 54% whereas the male one is 46%. In addition, the age ranges are:

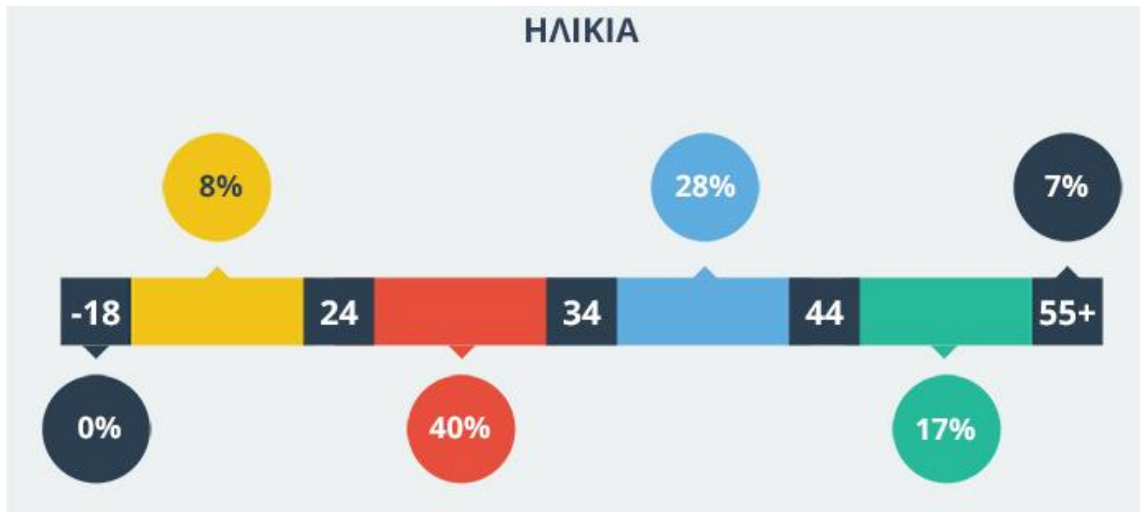


Figure 1: Age ranges (Travel survey by Travelstories 2014)



Figure 2: How many countries have you visited?
(Travel survey by Travelstories 2014)

So, as it is shown in the figure above, there is a mixture of variety of ages which means that users have different experiences that shape a mutual understanding between novice and experienced participants in travel perception. Instead of performing goals; learning communities produce artifacts and stories that help in sharing knowledge (Wenger, 1998). Knowledge is expanded through discussion (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999) so a key element of CoP is the creation of a discussion place which is the major goal of this community. A key concept of CoP is the community knowledge, in which the sum of this is greater than the sum of individual participants' knowledge. Sharing their knowledge

develops a very good level of information for each place. In addition, travel information change all the time, so a travel community in order to be well informed bases on travels of members to update the information of each place. Another issue which could arise in virtual communities is the diversity of cultures (Lebaron *et al*, 2008). In other words, “*different cultures can hinder the “cultural” development of the community of practice itself (i.e., the community of practice develops its own culture over time)*” (Wenger, 1998, cited in Johnson, 2001) but this is being overcome in the specific forum since everyone has to speak Greek and focuses on Greek members. So a CoP becomes easier to emerge.

2.3.b Joint Enterprise

According to Wenger (1998) three points that keep a CoP together are:

1. The result of collective process of negotiation that reflects the full complexity of mutual engagement
2. It is defined by the participants in the very process of pursuing it.
3. It is not just a stated goal, but creates among participants relations of mutual accountability.

Stemming from these points, the administration of the site tries to consider the perceptions of the members in the designing process of the site. This is being realized through questionnaires and discussions in the forum. With these efforts the members feel that they participate in the shaping of their own forum-community which makes them more loyal members. In addition, the administrator tries to identify the needs of the community since a virtual community is designed not only to serve the users’ needs but also to shape their needs through practice. For instance, in a survey indicated that the affordance of photo gallery is not so satisfied and it was immediately taken into consideration in the next development of the site and now the photo gallery has been upgraded, and very welcomed by the members of the society.

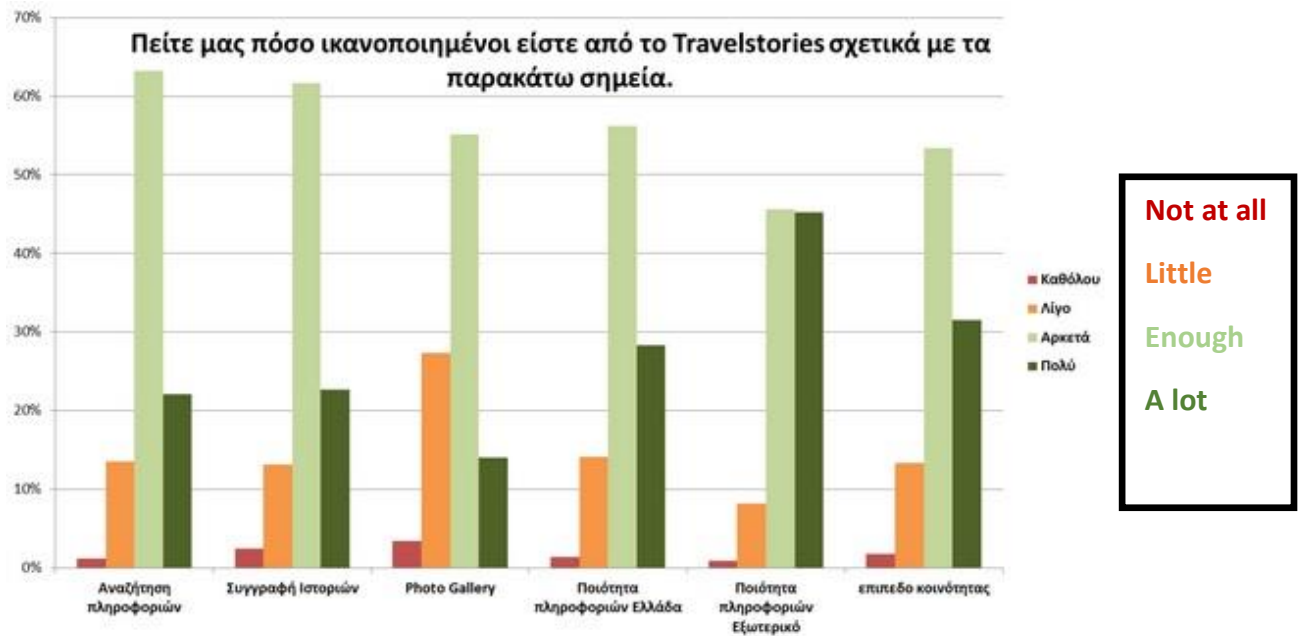


Figure 3: How much satisfied are you from Travelstories regarding to: 1. Searching Information, 2. Stories, 3. Photo Gallery, 4. Quality of information Greece, 5. Quality of information Abroad, 6. Level of Community. (Travel survey by Travelstories 2014)

2.4.c Shared repertoire

‘The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concept that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence’ (Wenger, 1998 p83). A travel research in 2014 showed that 72% of the members regulate this issue through internet, whereas in the same research in 2013 the percentage was 70%. In addition, in 2014 1% of the members claim that they regulate everything through travel offices whereas in 2013 the percentage was 2%. These differences were not so big but nevertheless indicate a change *‘in ways of doing things’* in favour of the majority of the community. So it can be claimed that the community shapes the actions of their members, as the theory of CoP indicates. Furthermore, members of the community in 2013 claimed that in terms of travelling, they use internet for:



Figure 4: Willingness to buy travel services through the Internet 2013 (Travel survey by Travelstories 2014)

- 89% for airplane booking
- 83% for hotel booking
- 27% for car booking
- 34% for ferry booking

Whereas in the same question in 2014 they answered:



Figure 5: Willingness to buy travel services through the Internet 2014 (Travel survey by Travelstories 2014)

- 90% for airplane booking
- 86% for hotel booking
- 29% for car booking
- 38% for ferry booking

Again it seems that this rise took place due to the shaping of using tools inside the community as part of their practice. Also, in 2014 research showed that 90% of the sample claimed that they use the same website for booking their accommodation. This could be considered as product of the users' common negotiation through discussion depending on the affordances of other booking websites.

On the other hand, it is unlikely for a virtual community to develop its own gestures, as theory suggests, due to lack of face to face communication. This needs a lot of discussion and further development considering the CoP and whether the face to face communication is considered a vital element of the formation of CoP. Researchers like Fischer (1998), Hammond (1998), and Borthick & Jone, (2000) stress the importance of face to face content but without further development of the statement. Another element that emerges in CoP for developing learning environment is safety and trust (Grisham *et al*, 1999; Palloff and Pratt, 1999). In this community the 96% of users take the forum into consideration when organizing a trip, so this indicates a well-established trust between themselves.



Figure 6: How often you take into consideration the forum advises? (Travel survey by Travelstories 2014)

Finally, the following graph represents the intention of the members of community regarding their travel destination where it is shown that 94% of them prefer Europe. This interest creates a common space for sharing information, stories, and experiences among the members which strengthens their relationships.



Figure 7: Tension of traveling abroad (Travel survey by Travelstories 2014)

2.5 Structure of a Community of Practice

Travelstories seem to have the basic structure of the CoP. It consists of a core group with administrators instead of managers and with moderators instead of facilitators; the hierarchy seems to be the same but the terms are different as the scheme represents in corporate terms whereas administrator and moderator are mostly in Internet terms. Furthermore, there is an inner circle which could be easily identified as the most active members of forum who contribute the most in information and stories.

Finally, most of the people in the majority of forums just read and collect information, which in this case is indicated by the member list which shows the posts of each person. This probably happens because they think that they do not have anything to contribute in the forum since most of the answers and discussions have already been discussed. Many times in forums the interested members stay as passive readers until they feel that they can contribute as well, as part of the community.

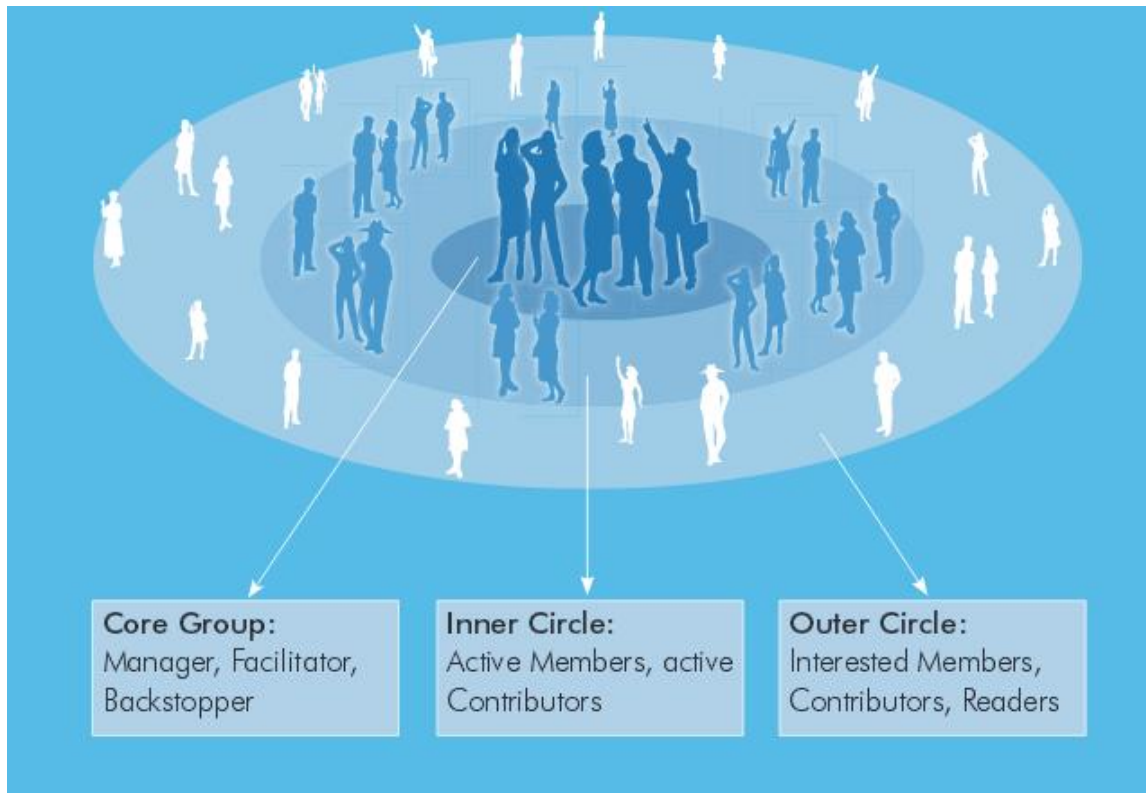


Figure 8: The Basic Structure of a CoP (Wenger, E., 2011)

2.6 Essential elements for a Community of Practice

According to Wenger (2011) in order for a CoP to exist, six elements are essential. Subsequently there will be an analysis regarding these elements considering the Travelstories.gr/community:

1) There is a Community: Apparently this forum is a virtual community with some very active members but also with some not so active ones, as indicated from the research in 2014. However, the nature of the forum should be considered since it is a travel community and is normal for the members not to participate all the time in discussions which facilitate travel information. From this perspective, I think that it is a sufficiently active community. In addition, from the research arises that most of the members visit it again and again since 73% of the members have been part of the community for more than a year (Travel survey, by Travelstories 2014).

Πόσο συχνά επισκέπτεστε το Travelstories;

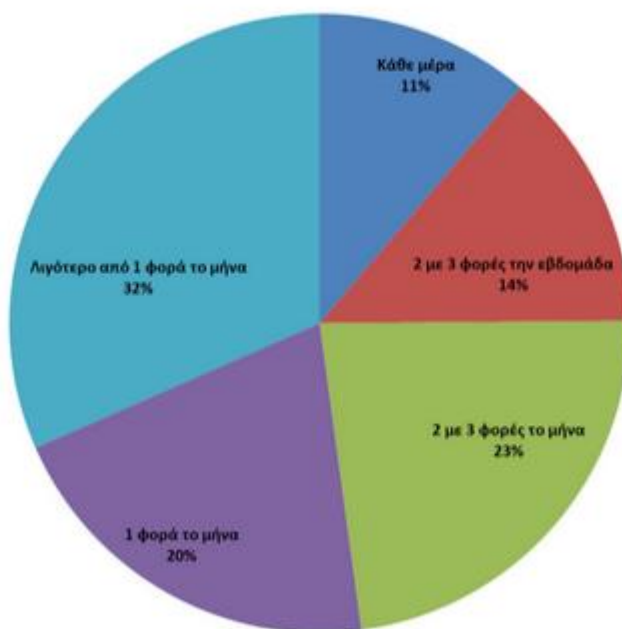


Figure 9: How often do you visit the Travelstories (Travel survey, by Travelstories 2014)

2) There is a Domain. The domain is meant to be a clear thematic orientation which is meaningful and relevant to the members. In addition, the members expect to improve their own practice through sharing experience. From the description of the forum “... *group of people who love traveling, sharing personal travel stories, and exchange information for future destinations*” it is profoundly that they have a very clear domain which is traveling. Besides, they practice on that in order to help everyone to travel easier.

3) There is a Practice. Each and every member has his/her own practice within the domain of the community of practice, and members know about each other's practice. In this perspective the practice in this forum is about writing travel stories which are used either as literary material or as information material. More particularly, 1791 stories have been written until now and there are 63.752 comments on these. Travel stories could be considered as the core of this forum but it seems that many discussions have taken place around them since the total posts on the forum is 484.921

4) There is Motivation. A CoP exists only through the motivation of its members. Adhering to a CoP often means developing a passion for it. A CoP could be developed in a professional environment but Travelstories stays alive and is being developed through the years because its members are highly motivated to engage in this community. Actually, in forums the motivation is intrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as the members themselves choose to get engaged in order to fulfill their personal goals.

5) There is a Mandate. It defines, on one hand, the thematic focus and the expected concrete results and on the other hand, the mandate provides open space for self-commitment to its members. As it is discredited from mandate, inside a community of practice a result is expected, which could be facilitated in this forum through the space that is provided. In addition, there is regulation in subjects of discussion because since there are a lot of different kinds of conversation that take place everyone has to respect the space and not to destroy it with spams or irrelevant posts. Finally, in forums that focus on one particular domain it is very common to have a space for totally irrelevant discussions from the domain.

6) There is a balance of formal and informal Structure. A CoP is a structure beyond organisational boxes and lines. Hierarchy is not an important element. On the one hand, there is hierarchy among the administrators and the moderators which is supposed to be for practical issues of the forum. On the other hand, this forum does not have hierarchy among its members. Apparently, there is no hierarchy in the discussion but the element of each one's expertise creates relations of power but community of practice does not focus on issues of power (Wenger, 2010).

2.7 Conclusions

The analysis of the Travelstories.gr/community forum arises from two theoretical concept of Wenger (1998 and 2011). The first one is more blur without strict structure about the elements which combine a community of practice. On the other hand, the most recent one is clearer, probably because the theory grows through the years, defining the essential characteristics of a community of practice. Consequently, this research tried to combine these theories in one coherent piece of work. Summarizing the above analysis the conclusions are that this community in his start is not a community of practice. Through years practising the virtual community Travelstories may emerge as a community of practice. In the particular community this is indicated by the surveys through the years which reveal a tension for the members of this community to practice in this asynchronous space of informal learning. Thus, the researcher believes that the virtual community of Travelstories could be characterized as community of practice since the six essential elements of the second theory have been accordingly developed in some extend regarding Travelstories as well as the first three main ones (a. Mutual Engagement b.c...). Finally, we should consider that a community of practice is not a static term but fluid as the practice changes.

2.8 References

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