

DISCUSS: Expansive Learning Approach

Authored by: Dr. Lesley Doyle

Partner Organisation: Glasgow University, Scotland (P3)

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There are two parts to the theoretical framework employed in the DISCUSS project. The first part is based on the key principles of a Community of Practice (CoP) conceptualised and developed by (Wenger et al, 2002) and the other is Engeström's (2001) theory of expansive learning.

It useful first to remember the aim of DISCUSS which is to develop a state-of-the-art platform for Virtual CoPs in lifelong learning, helping to foster dialogue and exchange between beneficiaries and users of the Lifelong Learning Program of the European Union, and bringing together project actors, experts, stakeholders, decision makers and end users in a collaborative environment.

We know that the VCoPs need to be stimulating, relevant and of value to the members, in order to attract and engage members and motivate them to scaffold collaboration and mutual learning across their existing VCoP and to initiate and develop new ones. In WP2 we developed a 12 step process for the DISCUSS platform's five 'starter' VCoPs, one for each of the five themes/CoPs identified for early development.

In the first part of this section, we will explain why and how we have adopted a second, complementary theoretical framework to that of Communities of Practice. In the second part of this section we will demonstrate how expansive learning provides a very practical way of understanding and putting into operation the 12 step process referred to above and, crucially, highlights the pivotal role played by DISCUSS as a creator, developer and propagator of what have been called 'boundary objects' (Star and Griesemer, 1989, cited in Engestrom and Sannino, 2010, p13).

1 Expansive learning

Virtual Community of Practice members need to experience their VCoP as belonging to them and they, in turn, need to be open to the ideas of new members so that the new members can in their turn experience the same. For this reason we recognise there are some limitations to VCoPs and the theoretical framework which underpins them.

Engeström and Sannino (2010) make this clear in their critique of Sfard (1998). They explain that the two basic metaphors of learning identified by Sfard (1998) - the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor – constitute an oversimplification 'largely inspired by the notion of community of practice put forward by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998)' (p1). Engeström and Sannino (2010) argue that Sfard (1998) focuses on one dimension – that is, where the learning is situated: with the learner or with the community. This 'one-dimensional conceptual space', they say, is sufficient for the vertical transmission of learning and empirical knowledge. It does not capture, however, forms of learning needed for communities that need to create new understanding, new concepts, new theories and new practice from what is already known and understood by the individuals in the community. Engeström (2001) called this expansive learning.

Such learning can be characterised as 'boundary crossing and network building' (Engeström and Sannino 2010 p. 12) and as 'distributed and discontinuous movement' (p14). For the VCoPs, comprising groups and organisations each with its own agenda, the concept of 'boundaries' is helpful. Such boundaries between the organisations the individuals represent are to be expected and can become even more complex if individuals from the same organization have different perspectives on their organisation's purpose for joining the VCoP. For a 'community' or 'network' to be formed these boundaries need to be recognized, discussed and overcome. Hubbard, Mehan and Stein (2006, cited in Engestrom and Sannino, 2010, p. 14) suggest that the discontinuities generated by activities or movement within and between the organisations in a network create learning opportunities.) where the organisations work to overcome the boundaries between them through identifying together the object of their networking, what it is that has the potential to cohere them as VCoP. They will each bring their own object(s), some will be shared in the network and some will be contested, but to form a community they will need to create, in the 'space' between them – what Gutierrez (2008) calls the 'third space' - new, mutually purposeful shared objects. This process constitutes another characteristic of expansive learning – 'transformation of the object' (Engestrom, 1987).

Crucial for the VCoPs is the concept of the development of a shared object or goal from what may start out as a 'contested object' but be worked into a 'shared goal' (p. 21). Engestrom refers to the discussions and activities around the resolution of conflicting boundaries and the creation of new objects as knotworking (2008). Crucial to the processes of the expansive learning involved in creating shared objects are what have been called 'boundary objects', which include knowledge repositories and graphic models (Star and Griesemer, 1989). Lambert (1999, cited in Engestrom and Sannino, 2010, p13) found that the creation of shared goals and objects, 'were largely dependent on the employment of appropriate tools'.

Expansive learning is based on the theoretical model of activity theory and this does have its critics. For example, Toomela (2008, cited in Engestrom 2009) argues that 'it focuses on analyses of activities without taking into account the individual involved in the activity at the same time'. Engestrom (2009) however, counters this the argument that 'Authority and agency are closely related. In agentic actions, we gain authority and become authors of our lives. This happens within historically changing patterns of activity and mediation'. In other words, in the activities of teams and networks, the individuals are changing and adapting along with the changing boundaries and development of boundary objects but they also construct and drive the change to the network. They are integral to those changes and the knotworking required to pave the way for them (p15).

2 Expansive learning, the DISCUSS platform, the moderators and the 12 step process for VCoPs

The VCoPs will need to learn about each other and their 'boundaries', involve themselves in 'knotworking' to work through difficulties and use their third spaces to create their own new collectively focused 'shared objects' for new activities created through expansive learning. DISCUSS plays a crucial role for the VCoPs in facilitating successful boundary crossing. It does this by creating, developing and propagating appropriate tools and helping the VCoPs employ them. In this way, DISCUSS facilitates the expansive learning in which the VCoP members will need to engage if they are to cohere, develop and sustain themselves.

2.1 *Expansive learning and the DISCUSS platform*

It is useful at this point to be reminded of the workings of the three-part DISCUSS platform; the moderation, social interaction and facilitation of the VCoPs; and the the 12 step process for developing a 'starter' VCoP for the DISCUSS platform.

The DISCUSS platform information pillar, consisting of information and news compiled from relevant project websites, is delivered in a common format to allow for effective knowledge sharing, project information from external websites. It provides a fundamentally important boundary object for the VCoPs – the ability to communicate and to share knowledge, information, experiences and resources.

Similarly, the collaborative workspaces offer a variety of rich tools, or boundary objects, for asynchronous and synchronous communication. These workspaces can be used to identify, explore, discuss or develop concrete activities with regard to an issue or problem of common interest. In this way, both shared and contested spaces can be identified and the opportunity provided for them to be worked through whether in one of the thematic workgroups, which allow members to interact at a personal level, through chat with real-time translation into the user languages. The cloud-based wiki, supports expansive learning by providing the space for incremental elaboration of a theme or issue, knowledge management, building glossaries and bringing together knowledge gained from discussions in one place.

Finally, the social network pillar supports the building of individual relationships (and trust) between the members, an important element in expansive learning where the individual's agentic role is essential to the development of shared objects

2.2 *Expansive learning and the moderators*

However, to begin with it is not expected that VCoPs will be able to exploit unaided the boundary objects provided by the DISCUSS platform. Assistance and support will be provided by the three different categories of moderators and in this way they will be the activators of the boundary objects above for the VCoP. Professional CoP moderators encourage and facilitate social interaction. The development of leadership will be essential to mediate different interests and potential contested objects between the community members. The professional CoP moderators also develop further boundary objects such as bulletins, newsletters and welcoming new members. Similarly, CoP volunteer moderators, the “theme experts“, recruited from the members pool, will actively support the identification of discussion topics, the development of knowledge sharing and discussion on themes of particular relevance to the members. They will support the community members to set up workgroups and develop concrete activities in the workgroups. These are further boundary objects which are crucial to the success of the VCoPs. CoP assistants support the communities in using the DISCUSS infrastructure and tools. For example, working in co-working spaces requires a basic understanding of the concept and practical skills to make effective use of the web technologies. The regular online training sessions, which the CoP assistants will conduct with interested members, will provide opportunities for new members to take full advantage of the other boundary objects.

2.3 *Expansive learning and the 12-step process*

Expansive learning is helpful in understanding how the 12 step process needs to work to be successful. Again, we use the working example of moving from a CoP to a ‘starter’ VCoP with a project working to the theme of improving the quality of adult education by promoting social and economic cohesion through improved adult learning outcomes with potential for cross-programme synergies.

In the suggested ways of working below, it is assumed that at all times the activists of the VCoP will work with, and utilise, the moderators along with the other boundary objects. The moderators are there to facilitate the effective working of the other boundary objects in support of the VCoP members but especially, in the first instance, the activists.

1. The project is already functioning as a non-virtual CoP with a number of the impediments to working described above but with a facilitator and activists

Clearly, the extent to which there has already been expansive learning in the existing CoP before becoming a VCoP will have a significant impact on the way the boundary objects will be used - including the approach the moderators take in their different roles – with the members of the CoP. The first task will be to ask the group members to explain what their purpose is for belonging to the CoP and to becoming a VCoP. This is a task for the professional CoP moderators. It will provide a grounding for future work and begin to lay out where the boundaries are between member organisations in respect of the new VCoP and what the shared and contested objects are. This will also be a time when existing objects as a CoP may need to be revisited. What are the shared objects? What is contested? How are contested objects managed? Who manages them?

2. CoP activists to analyse their practice and those of the CoP members for whether they are already working to the CoP principles and if so which ones

The cloud-based wiki can be used by the professional and assistant moderators to encourage participation from all the members to post up the achievements of their various organisations and the contributions they have made to the existing CoP. What are the achievements of the existing CoP?

3. DISCUSS to identify and work with the CoP activists to analyse their practice in relation to networking as an important and potentially tricky element in the process of 'growing the community'

Here, the volunteer moderators will be helpful in supporting the setting up of the thematic workgroups likely to emerge from 2. above. What are the shared and contested objects within the theme? What are they? How are the latter managed within the theme?

4. DISCUSS to take cross-section of CoP members' advice on setting up the information processing and management relevant to the project/theme using the DISCUSS pyramid framework and the 3 pillars (Workflow unit a)

At this point, members can be asked to review the existing resources and how they have displayed so far, and to look at the rationale of the thematic groups. This is a first opportunity for the CoP members to think about themselves as a group with an activity and to begin to take ownership of the VCoP. They will need the support and encouragement of all the moderators.

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5. We will work with the CoP members to assist them in understanding how the DISCUSS architecture can work for their project as currently constituted (Workflow unit a)

This is the stage where, on the basis of the shared objects, it will be possible for VCoP members to begin to discuss what type of joint, mutually beneficial activities they may be able to organize using the DISCUSS boundary objects. It may also be the point where for some members the 'contested boundaries' are not reconcilable. The CoP activists, supported by the moderators, will have to decide whether it is in the interests of the groups that those members who do not see a joint purpose or shared boundary part company. At the same time it is an opportunity to consider new possibilities that had hitherto been inaccessible to the old CoP.

6. We will work with the CoP members to understand how to exploit the DISCUSS architecture to develop their CoP work and identify in what ways becoming VCoP can assist and develop this work qualitatively (Workflow unit b)

This is the stage when the CoP assistants will start to serve the requirements of the VCoP as a whole and in the thematic workgroups, in order to ensure that the boundary objects don't in themselves become 'boundary obstacles' to the planned activities of the VCoP.

7. We will help the CoP understand how to exploit the DISCUSS architecture for their CoP outreach work and identify in what ways becoming a VCoP can assist with and expand this work for cross-programme synergies with similar projects and partners (Workflow unit c)

At this point, the professional moderators will be needed again to mediate different interests and potential contested objects between the community members

8. We will monitor to see how they manage/whether it is manageable for them (Workflow unit d)

This is a task for the assistant moderators to ensure that VCoP members in the co-working spaces have a basic understanding of the concept and practical skills to make effective use of the web technologies

9. We will gather VCoP feedback to see if members are able to function more effectively as a VCoP (ie closer to our framework) with DISCUSS as compared to before as a CoP (Workflow unit e)

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This level of feedback would be best gathered with the support of the professional moderators using the thematic workgroups, which allow members to interact at a personal level, through chat with real-time translation into the user languages.

10. We will make modifications according to user recommendations (Workflow unit e)

The recommendations can be gathered by the CoP assistants

11. We will work with VCoP members to help attract further partners either through activities of VCoP or through deliberate recruitment

This is a role for the professional moderators who can help develop further boundary objects such as invitations for welcoming new members.

12. We will identify, with VCoP methods for adapting/using the above steps, including consideration of the theoretical framework for a VCoP, in the integration new members.

This is a task that will need the support of all the moderators in their different roles

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