PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

A community of practice (CoP) is a term used to inform research in art education programmes. The expression refers, in this context, to artists who share similar themes, methods or approaches to their students' independent art practice. The purpose of research in this area is for students to use their understanding of the methods and concepts of established practice to contextualise their own practical, theoretical and art historical investigations. Examples of the types of community of practice that a student may research include the pop art movement, which engaged in mass media and consumerism, or the feminist art movement that sought ways to express women's experiences and quest for gender equality. These movements can become important references for study and reflection for the art student whose practice incorporates themes of (for example) consumer culture or inequality respectively.
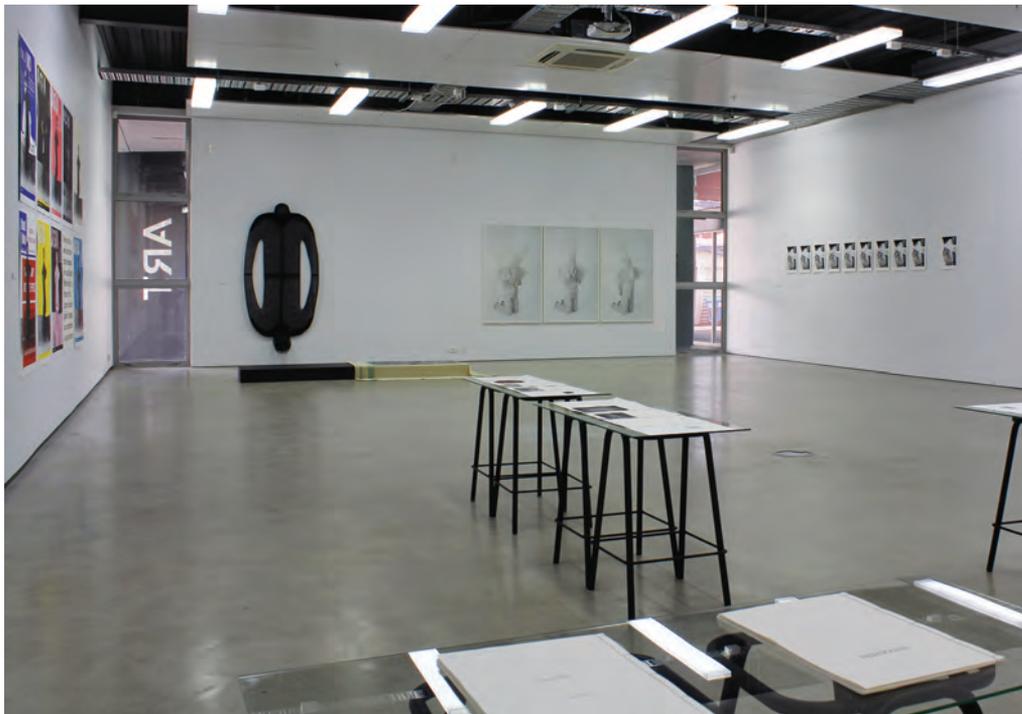

Figure 1. The News Network, "*On Air*" exhibition, Dunedin School of Art Gallery, 2015, installation view.

Although the term 'artist models' is sometimes inappropriately applied to this form of research, CoP is the more commonly accepted terminology. However, in terms of a social theory that involves the practice of engagement, educational theorist Etienne Wenger's communities of practice take a more active role in the learning process. [1] The personal and professional partnership of Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner describe one form of CoP as "a band of artists seeking new forms of expression. They refer to people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour." [2]

This article investigates Etienne Wenger's definition of a CoP with a view to aligning his social theory with the approach taken by The News Network Project which, as a group of trans-Tasman artists, aims to engage in contemporary debate and artistic production around current events, politics and conflict through participation in a creative network. At the same time, I examine social theory as a means of seeking value through the implementation of a CoP for students in a work-based learning (WBL) context. I employ the example of a WBL project where students engage with alumni from the Dunedin School of Art's Print Studio to co-ordinate a group exhibition.

I seek to address the benefits of learning through active participation in a given social environment by firstly defining a CoP. I then summarise Wenger's book, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, and reflect on CoPs in WBL. I conclude with strategies to apply a CoP to a WBL context in the visual arts.

DEFINING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AS SOCIAL THEORY

Although a long-established concept, 'community of practice' is a fairly recent term that describes a key approach to knowing and learning. By definition, "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." [3] CoPs are everywhere and we all participate in several CoPs at any given time, such as a family situation or a local art group. Learning is supported through our individual relationships, our communities and the organisations with which we are involved.

The News Network Project is a group of artists from Melbourne and Canberra (Australia), Auckland and Dunedin (NZ), who first came together in a residency at the Dunedin School of Art and are linked through their making of artworks recontextualised from news media that engage in social comment through a print-based practice. Each artist has an established individual practice, and in engaging in The News Network Project hopes to encourage critical discussion of social issues and contemporary art while broadening their public engagement and sustaining an ongoing trans-Tasman creative network. Their participation in group exhibitions and residencies unites and strengthens the network as a CoP, while fostering the development of a growing and evolving community.

CoPs build on situated learning, a term that describes how individuals acquire skills and experience through a social process first proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger as a model of learning. [4] The apprenticeship model of learning in a living community is based on this concept. It is in these social interactions that help shape the identities of those involved that a CoP is defined.

There is a distinction between a community, as in the local people in a neighbourhood, and a CoP, where three major characteristics determine the concept. The first characteristic is the domain, defined as a shared interest or commitment that establishes a common or collective identity. The second characteristic relates to community-building through the engagement and interaction that stems from the members in the domain. The third characteristic relates to practice and, as practitioners, the members build on their resources by sharing their knowledge, ideas and experiences. The combination of all three characteristics working in unison contributes to the success of the CoP.

Participating in a CoP offers individuals valuable resources and access to existing knowledge that means there is no need to 'reinvent the wheel,' but rather to build on the prior experience of others. A successful CoP requires more than mere collaboration – it allows for varying viewpoints to be discussed and mediated. This exchange of ideas and information helps to structure the practice of the communities and to mould the identities of the individuals involved.

ETIENNE WENGER'S *COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: LEARNING, MEANING, AND IDENTITY* **(1998)**

Wenger presents a theory of learning that starts with the assumption that engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we get to know what we know and by which we become who we are. As we are social beings, learning not only takes place in a classroom, but in the day-to-day activities of active participation in a social environment. Rather than seeing it as an independent process, Wenger suggests placing learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world.[5] By participation, he refers to an inclusive process of being active agents in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities.[6] In this way, a meaningful personal experience within a community is integrated through shared perspectives, that in turn shape who we are and how we make sense of what we do. The learning undertaken in a CoP is not prescriptive, but is sustained through constant personal transformation and adaptation to suit the nature of the CoP and those involved.

In his book, Wenger's social theory of learning is presented in two parts, focusing on 'practice' and 'identity,' with an epilogue on design. He begins each part with a case study based on qualitative research he undertook in an organisation involving claims processing. I found his references to claims processors dry and far-removed from the visual arts communities I wished to explore, with the text oriented toward organisations rather than the educational sector. Throughout the book, he refers back to his experiences with the claims processors, which clearly helped him formulate his theory of learning in communities of practice in an organisational context. (It is only in the final chapter that Wenger discusses a framework for education for teachers and students working together, in an epilogue based on design for learning.) The two parts to the book focus respectively on practice, as in learning as doing, and identity, best defined as learning as becoming.

For Wenger, practice is a process whereby we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful through all types of experiences. 'Meaning' is understood not in the sense of a dictionary definition, but as a negotiation involving participation and reification.[7] Negotiated meaning is a reciprocal and unprecedented process that identifies the construction of shared historical and cultural resources and perspectives, requiring both interpretation and action. Reification, as described by Wenger, involves the process of making ideas concrete through the production and use of artefacts as a product of meaning.[8] The meaningfulness of our engagement in the world develops through a continued mutual engagement in, and communication with, a community. Conversations that tap into others' experience, open discussions, peer observations and brainstorming are all approaches that contribute to learning in an effective CoP. Community engagement not only crystallises our understanding, but communicates knowledge to the novice not yet experienced or fully conversant with the community.

Each CoP develops what Wenger terms "boundary objects" and "locality." Boundary objects are the distinctive repertoire, idiosyncrasies and complex understandings that characterise each CoP and make it unique.[9] Locality refers to the specific resources, relationships, problem-solving procedures and local jargon that characterise a given CoP.[10]

For Wenger, identity is an intrinsic aspect of a social theory of learning that includes issues regarding participation and inclusion, and recognises the social, cultural and historical character of each individual. There is an identity as a community, but the community also shapes the identities of its members. In a learning community, a tension is activated between ability and knowledge, with experience gained through participation and reification. Levels of participation are flexible. Participation is a defining characteristic of identity, and is managed by individuals through what we care about, what we attempt to know, those with whom we seek connections, how we engage our energies and how we attempt to steer our trajectories.[11]

A personal example of identity shaped through participation in a community is my connection to the Print Studio at the Dunedin School of Art, also known as the P Lab (Print Laboratory), which operates as a shared space in the use of workshop facilities, undertakes collaborative projects with students and maintains connections through

their website. Through hosting an alumni exhibition, I anticipate that the alumni would be able to share stories with students and other alumni about their experiences at the art school. The alumni exhibition – a WBL project – will enable these conversations to take place and open doors for collaboration and the sharing of ideas, offering students opportunities to find their place in the art world and make them better prepared to realise their future aspirations.

To make sense of identity formation and learning in communities of practice, Wenger considers three modes of belonging in a community – engagement, imagination and alignment. The connections and activities pursued in participation and reification make mutual engagement a distinctive context for learning and identity and the acquisition of knowledge. The process of imagination requires separation to innovate, along with the freedom and energy to explore and question new ideas for the creation of knowledge. Alignment requires the combination of identification and a receptive negotiability to create a social ecology of identity that explores and defines the values of the CoP. Wenger states that negotiability is a strong factor in the success of a CoP, as it requires a balance of engagement for learning to take place.[12]

From my perspective, the aim of WBL in an arts project is to give students the opportunities to engage in professional practice in the visual arts industries and to expand their knowledge of the contemporary art scene in real-world scenarios. However, a student-centred approach requires a degree of autonomy in any decision-making affecting students in order that they may feel a part of the community. However, in saying that, by operating as part of a community, students need to be open to alternative and diverse viewpoints.

It is in the epilogue of his book that Wenger, as part of his framework of practice and identity, discusses the kind of "social design" that fosters learning for education and the formation of identities. Understanding the concept of a CoP will enable future-focused strategies for learning developed through a social perspective. For Wenger, learning changes who we are by changing our ability to participate, to belong, and to negotiate meaning.[13] CoPs cannot be designed formulaically, as tend to be organic, open-ended and flexible. The WBL project itself is a site for self-directed learning and, as such, learning outcomes cannot be predicted. An educator's role would be to facilitate, support, encourage and nurture a CoP in its participation and decision-making and to recognise that each community is responsible for its own learning.

Four dualities are discussed by Wenger to capture the challenge of design for learning.[14] One of these dual dimensions relates to power, and constitutes the tension between "Identification and Negotiability," which must have a framework that is negotiable in practice and that contributes to the motivation for creative learning. As far as a framework of learning "architecture" in education is concerned, Wenger prioritises identities that, through education, open new dimensions for the negotiation of the self.[15] This understanding of self applies to art students and impacts on their conceptual development, informing both their research interests and outcomes based on their own experiences in the real world. Wenger acknowledges that students need to be able to discover and feel motivated to invest in their own learning and reification of knowledge.[16] By engaging in a community in which they can comfortably critique opinions, students gain confidence in their critical thinking skills and articulation of ideas.

Participants in a CoP contribute in a variety of independent ways that become material for building an identity.[17] It is important that students are given equal opportunities to share their knowledge and expertise. For a CoP to be effective, adaptability, tolerance and empathy are solid qualities, but there must also be respect for multiple perspectives as we live in a time and place of multicultural diversity. Finally, Wenger makes a brief mention of the value of the "dual professional" as an authentic form of participation, as he sees this as an essential requirement of teaching.[18] Members of The News Network are all practising artists, with the majority also involved in the tertiary arts education sector. As a group, they present a meaningful example of an active CoP.

REFLECTING ON CoPS IN A WBL CONTEXT

According to Charles Jennings, the majority of adult learning occurs not through formal learning but through experience, practice, conversations and reflection in the workplace.[19] WBL offers a broad and informal learning structure while contributing value and relevance and encouraging lifelong learning through meaningful participation in the world. I would like to think that this aspect of learning over their lifetime will impact on our students through their participation in the exhibition project and contact with alumni in an ongoing and sustained community. In addressing the Otago Polytechnic (OP) Learning and Teaching Strategic Framework for capable, work-ready, future-focused, sustainable practitioners, engaging in CoPs will equip students with a wide range of graduate attributes. These include, in particular, the ability to take purposeful action on the basis of knowledge, experience, reflection and connectedness.[20] Externally, avenues for social networking via the internet provide fast, innovative and accessible strategies for broader communication. Technology has come a long way in the last two decades since Wenger discussed his social theory of learning; however, he continues his dedicated research and studies on the subject. A more recent publication proposes a research agenda that develops a theoretical foundation to help address the learning challenges of our globalising world.[21]

For me, the nature of a CoP implies a bottom-up, grassroots approach to learning. Wenger discusses the horizontality of learning as an emerging trend.[22] I can't help but see a connection to the rhizome and its horizontality as a result of the intertwining and interconnecting relationships formed through participation in communities. CoPs are organic and constantly evolving. The way that I consider the concept of the rhizome translating into a CoP is not through outcomes or final products, but through valuing the sustaining participation and knowledge-generation of the learning communities in mutual partnership. There is autonomy in the choices made and accessibility offered. Also, learning is not a one-way street, so we need to be open and active practitioners in our rapidly changing cultural and digital climate.

There are a number of questions I would like to address regarding the application of Wenger's theory in a WBL context:

- What can the student learn from this experience?

- In what beneficial ways could the CoP shape students' identities?

- How does this fit within curriculum requirements, especially in relation to Professional Practice?

- How can the flexibility of a CoP be evaluated and assessed in a WBL context?

- Which strategies for the creation and functioning of a CoP are working and why? These observations can guide future actions.

These questions can be addressed following the implementation of the CoP and by monitoring and reflection on the levels of learning and community engagement achieved once it is established.

APPLYING A CoP TO A WBL CONTEXT IN THE VISUAL ARTS

The Community of Practice Design Guide provides a step-by-step guide to creating a community of practice based on the authors' experiences working with corporations, non-profits, associations, government organisations and educational institutions.[23] The guide offers strategies to develop mutual associations for collective learning and knowledge-sharing, and ways in which to grow and sustain CoPs. The guide supports Wenger's definition of a CoP, stressing the value of what the authors describe as a social architecture that energises the community and a technical architecture that supports the community. "The roles, processes, and approaches that engage people – whether face-to-face or online – are essential in relationship building, collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, and action."[24] The guide also stipulates that a CoP must have a purpose, and outlines five specific issues to be considered in establishing a CoP – inquire, design, prototype, launch and grow. I believe that this guide provides a useful model

Figure 2. The News Network, '*Broadcast*' exhibition. RMIT Lightscapes, Melbourne, 2016.
Works by Marion Wassenaar (left) and Marian Crawford (right), installation view.

by which to steer the alumni exhibition project, and it also provides useful information that could support students in their engagement in a CoP.

The University of Tasmania provides a comprehensive resource for developing a CoP that includes a toolkit and checklist.[25] Along with the three dimensions that define the concept of a CoP – community, domain and practice – the toolkit also suggests motivation, mandate and structure as essential, yet hidden, elements of a CoP.[26]

Tasked with bringing together alumni and students to the Print Studio, I feel it is my role to nurture motivation, drive the mandate and maintain a balanced structure. I recognise that, having been a student and now an alumna, I am able to understand the position of each group so to be able to facilitate engagement. "Getting in on the Act" is a report that looks at how arts groups are creating opportunities for active participation.[27] The focus of the report is on the relationship between commercial arts agencies and how they interact with their audience, looking at ways to promote engagement in the arts to the general public. Given its emphasis, I feel that although the report is not directly relevant to this paper, it has highlighted the limited research that has been done on CoPs in the arts in relation to my own research interests. Through my engagement with both The News Network Project and the alumni exhibition, I consider that this is an area I can respond to in the future.

What I hope that the alumni exhibition project achieves is a sense of camaraderie, by actively connecting students with alumni through a WBL experience. The connections they make and the knowledge gained and shared will, I believe, give students more confidence to actively participate in the art world and hopefully generate long-term relationships. Writing this paper has given me a better understanding of CoPs as a theory of learning and equipped me with a store of information to enable me to further cultivate and reflect on a CoP in future.

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4   Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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6   Ibid., 4.

7   Ibid., 51.

8   Ibid., 55.

9   Ibid., 113.

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