

The professional identity of SALL practitioners

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Abstract

This paper examines the professional identity of practitioners in the field of self-access language learning (SALL) at tertiary level institutions in Hong Kong. It uses research data and examples from the literature to illustrate membership of a SALL practitioners' professional community which exhibits the characteristics of a "community of practice" (CoP) as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991). After outlining the three key elements (Wenger, 2006) and the seven main principles of a CoP (Wenger et al, 2003), we illustrate through interview data a clear example of membership and non-membership of the community and discuss an example of how teachers who are not initially members were inducted into a CoP by challenging their beliefs and values. Thirdly, we identify ways to bring teachers into a SALL practitioners' CoP and review the key features which promote and strengthen such a community. Nurturing a strong SALL practitioner's CoP and encouraging teachers' membership of it contributes to the development of their professional identity.

1. Introduction

In the early 1990s the Hong Kong government's tertiary education funding body, the University Grants Committee (UGC), gave each tertiary institution a one-off grant to help improve English language learning. As a result of receiving this money, all the institutions decided to establish Self-Access Centres (SACs). English teachers, mostly in Language Centres, were given the role of designing, developing, and managing these SACs and soon a network of teachers dedicated to self-access language learning (SALL) developed. We argue that this network has evolved into a community of practice (CoP). A key milestone in that evolution was the formation of an organization in mid-1990 known as The Hong Kong Association for Self Access Learning and Development (HASALD). The establishment of the CoP along with the continued development of SALL have transformed Hong Kong into a centre of excellence in research and publication about SALL, SACs, and learner autonomy.

This paper looks at the professional identity of SALL practitioners in universities in Hong Kong within the context of their membership of a developing CoP. We begin by defining the main elements of communities of practice and the key principles for their development with reference to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (2006) and Wenger et al (2003). We then use a data-based example to illustrate through a contrastive analysis the professional identity associated with CoP membership. We also use an example from the literature discuss how novice members, who lack a SALL-practitioner professional identity, can be inducted into the community. Finally, we make suggestions for applying the principles of Wenger et al (2003) to a SALL practitioners' CoP and offer examples from the Hong Kong context.

2. Community of Practice

The concept of community of practice (CoP) was developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998; 2006) to describe groups who develop their expertise in a specific area of activity through regular interaction and sharing. This is a concept which will be familiar to those teachers who find that working in teams to achieve common goals also contributes to their professional development. So, a CoP is more than just a group of people

working together. It also includes the notions of: personal and group development as an outcome of membership; focus; and continuity. Three elements are required for a successful CoP (Wenger, 2006): an area of shared expertise (the domain), a group which interacts regularly (the community) and resources which can be shared collectively (the practice). In the context of a SALL practitioners' CoP, these elements could be seen as laid out in Table 1.

Table 1 The three elements of a SALL practitioners CoP

<i>Elements of the CoP</i>	<i>Manifestation in the SALL Practitioners' CoP</i>
Domain	The field of self-access language learning and its relationships with autonomous learning and language teaching
Community	Language teachers with an interest in SALL, tutors within a self-access centre, managers of SALL resources, teachers of language courses containing an element of SALL, professional organisations which promote SALL.
Practice	Self-access learning facilities and materials, research materials related to SALL.

Gardner and Miller (2013) have given an example of how Wenger's (2006) three elements of a CoP can be seen in one particular instance of a SALL practitioners' CoP which has developed over 20 years in Hong Kong. The evidence they give is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Applying Wenger's (2006) three key elements of a CoP to an example from Hong Kong (based on Gardner and Miller, 2013)

<i>Elements of the CoP</i>	<i>Manifestation in Hong Kong</i>
Domain	Large-scaled and relatively rapid development of self-access through the funding and establishment of self-access centres in all Hong Kong tertiary institutions in the early 1990s, and the accumulation of a group of teachers interested in their development. The later expansion of the domain into the secondary school sector, and also into the virtual world and into taught courses.
Community	The founding of HASALD by a group of teachers with mutual interests for sharing ideas about self-access learning. This association has endured for more than 20 years and has expanded to include members from a wider range of institutions and educational levels. The hosting of subject-specific seminars and conferences; some local, some international; inter-institutional projects
Practice	A large increase in the production of materials specific to self-access learning, and the sharing of ideas about materials and activities. Development and then rapid growth of a significant research presence in the field.

In addition to the necessary elements of a CoP as described above, Wenger et al (2003) have suggested seven principles which can maximise the successful development of a CoP (Table 3). It is important to understand that a CoP cannot be forced into existence. In a fundamental sense, a CoP can only develop organically and according to the need for it. However, these principles can enhance that development by guiding the initial design of the CoP and its ongoing development.

Table 3 A summary of the principles for the development of a CoP (based on Wenger et al., 2003, pp.51-63)

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
1. Design for evolution	The design of the CoP should include social and organisational elements that will facilitate its evolution but without predetermining the way in which it evolves.
2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives	The CoP should be designed to encourage dialogue between those within the CoP and those outside it. The insiders best understand community issues but outsiders help the community maintain perspective and identify potential. This dialogue will facilitate development and prevent stagnation.
3. Invite different levels of participation	CoPs should provide opportunities for different levels of participation to acknowledge that individual members may wish to contribute to a greater or lesser extent and that the level of an individual's participation may vary over time. Operating different participatory tiers implies leadership opportunities and this will encourage development and active participation.
4. Develop both public and private community spaces	Members of a CoP can benefit from opportunities to network individually or in small groups but also by interacting more widely with a larger group of members. Providing a variety of interactional opportunities strengthens communication and thus the community.
5. Focus on value	Members need to see value in their membership for the CoP to survive. Therefore, the CoP should be designed in a way which makes value apparent. It should also be recognised that CoPs change as they mature and the reason for their existence may also change. Thus, it is important to periodically involve members in an exercise to identify the value of the CoP to ensure it stays current and also to demonstrate value to new members.
6. Combine familiarity and excitement	CoPs thrive on a balance of familiar and new activities. Familiarity provides a level of assurance and comfort whereas novelty adds an element of excitement and change. Too much change may create uncertainty whereas too little change may induce apathy.
7. Create a rhythm for the community	CoPs are more successful when they operate at a pace suitable to their members. Perceptions of pace may be relative to the amount of time members have available. An apparently slow pace engenders a sense of inactivity whereas an uncomfortably fast pace creates distress. An appropriate pace creates a sense of satisfaction in members.

It can be seen therefore that a CoP is not a loose association of like-minded individuals sharing some ideas. In its most successful form it is a planned community which is designed for evolution with varying levels of participation where less experienced members may apprentice themselves to more experienced members who mentor them. A successful CoP will provide opportunities for interaction among members in small and large groups and also interaction with the outside world as a way of retaining perspective and learning new things. Most importantly, a successful CoP will evolve a rhythm for its activities and develop a balance of familiar and novel events which makes its membership comfortable but not complacent.

3. Membership of a Community of Practice: How to identify it

In this section we illustrate, via interview data, how members may identify themselves as belonging to a SALL Community of Practice, as defined in Section 2. The data comes from a large scale, ethnographic, study into self-access centres in Hong Kong universities (Gardner and Miller, 2014). One part of the study focused on talking to managers of SACs in order to gain an understanding of how the SACs had developed over a 15 year period (see Gardner and Miller 2010). In analysing the data we were interested to see how similarly the managers talked about their involvement in SALL and in the interviews we probed to find out how much they shared in common about the principals and practices of learner autonomy. Seven SALL managers (SAM 1-7) participated in the first part of the study. The interview data shows that six of the seven managers talked about SALL in similar ways, however, one SALL manager (SAM-7) did not. An analysis of this manager’s interview data when contrasted with that of a typical member of the community (SAM-4) shows how differently these interviewees answer questions about their SACs (see Table 4 for examples).

Table 4 Interview data contrasted to illustrate membership and non-membership of a SALL community of practice

<i>Theme/Topic</i>	<i>SAM-4 (typical member)</i>	<i>SAM-7 (non-member)</i>
Description of SAC Opening Hours	SAM-2: Summer hours, they change slightly actually. Er... Interviewer: OK, we don’t need to know, but just “slightly”? Shorter or longer? SAM-2: Shorter	Interviewer: The Self-access Centre itself follows the library opening hours... so what are the library opening hours? SAM-1: I’m not terribly sure
Staffing	Interviewer: About the training. Do any of the SAC staff have specialist training? Can you tell us what LLA is? Is that specifically counselling training? SAM-2: Language Learning Advisors. So we just shortened that...it is just telling them what we believe to be their role as a language learning advisor.	Interviewer: How much of their workload is the job of helping you out? SAM-1: This is something that I’m not too sure about. I know that they have all signed contracts with the English Dept. Each week they are supposed to allocate 3 hours for working with us. And that’s all I know. That’s the part I am responsible for.
Role	Interviewer: What kind of things do you do? SAM-2: My role is more coming up with the ideas of how things should change or which areas we should develop.	Interviewer: What is your roll? SAM-1: My role, actually, I myself, I don’t even participate in the MMLC activities. I just liaise with the library so I’m some kind of middleman.
Users	SAM-2: [The College of Business and College of Science and Engineering] are the ones that predominantly use the centre. These are the biggest groups. Interviewer: Does that mean you don’t get students from other areas? SAM-2: No we have them, yes.	Interviewer: How do you count them (the number of users of self-access)? SAM-1: We have no idea of how many users actually use the MMLC but the headcount is done by the library at the entrance, I guess. They do a headcount there and that’s it.

	<p>Interviewer: But these are the big groups? SAM-2: Yes</p>	
Duties	<p>SAM-2: ...it is all divided up, self-access learning, because we have the centre, we have the two core (SALL) courses which come under two other senior tutors, actually two totally different senior tutors because one's with the writing team and one's with the speaking team. And then we have the independent learning course which comes under the self-access team which I lead. So, most of it comes under my area of responsibility</p>	<p>Interviewer: ...this is what you coordinate...it's like the equivalent of coordinating the course? SAM-1: I think so Interviewer: How much time do you think you spend on this? SAM-1: I think mostly. I work mostly at the beginning of a semester when I have to work out the tutors work schedule. And then after that it's just some communication. I pass around the messages and that's it. So it doesn't take me much time.</p>
Materials	<p>Interviewer: Before you were in charge someone else was in charge of the SAC. When you took over did you find you wanted to make any changes? SAM-2: Well the whole centre was completely refurbished and.... in terms of changes... not so much. I think certain areas were more developed. For example readers, we have discovered since I took over, the kinds of things that students like reading. So we've got more of the type of literature that they like. We have gone more into ESP and so we've looked at purchasing more resources for them. And a lot more online stuff as well, so not just the physical things in the centre... And also we are creating more materials for ESP online... Every semester something different, another initiative is followed up.</p>	<p>Interviewer: Who orders the CDs? SAM-1: We coordinate with the library and then very often when it's time to make a purchase the library will send us a message and ask us to make recommendations and we respond to that. Interviewer: And who manages that event? You? SAM-1: I think it's the library, no it's not me. Interviewer: So it's not part of your role to organise the ordering of the material? SAM-1: No not at all.</p>

The semi-structured interviews with the managers tried to capture a sense of what was happening at the time of the interview. We followed similar types of questions with each manager and allowed the managers to expand on any issue they wished to. What is interesting from Table 4 is that SAM-4 has a clear grasp of what is happening in the SAC and is able to engage on every topic presented to her in the interview. She is informative and knowledgeable about the SAC, and uses a discourse similar to that used by other SAC managers in talking about their SACs. On the other hand, SAM-7 shows very little involvement with the SAC and is almost unable to answer any of the questions. When she does respond she is vague and unsure of the information.

In our interviews with the SAM-1 to SAM-6 SAC (but not with SAM-7) we discovered that they shared common beliefs, values and attitudes towards SALL, albeit from different sources. They were able to articulate not only the practical aspects of what happened in their SACs with respect to opening hours, staffing, roles, users, duties, and materials, but when asked, they were able to indicate how they became involved in SALL and how their beliefs and attitude were formed. The managers' beliefs and values as promoters of learner autonomy stem from a number of sources, although it was noticeable that none of them mentioned being 'trained' in learner autonomy. Each manager entered the SALL community through various on-the-job learning experiences, personal beliefs in the wider concept of life-long learning, interacting with learners and observing their behaviour, reading the literature, attending seminars about SALL, and, most noticeably, being mentored by someone who promoted independent learning. As a result of these experiences each manager had formed an understanding of how SALL operates and how they could promote the skills of being an independent learner to students. In other words, they all belonged to the SALL community of practice in their thinking and actions.

4. Inducting members into a Community of Practice

The notion of apprenticeship is integral to the development of a CoP. However, there is little in the literature on learner autonomy about mentoring teachers who are new to supporting self-access language learners. Some writers advocate the need for professional development of teachers who begin working in SALL mode (Voller, 1997; Vieira, et al 2008), but the issue is still largely ignored. Reinders and Balcikanli (2011) in a review of 11 teacher education textbooks found little, if any, reference to independent language learning. They maintain that "Teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are closely linked and without sufficient knowledge and guidance, teachers are unlikely to develop the skills to be able to foster learner autonomy in their own classrooms." (p.22).

In this section we review one example of how language teachers learn what skills their students need to become independent learners, and how, in the process, the teachers are inducted into a SALL community. Hafner and Young (2007) report on how they successfully managed to change the established beliefs and values of a group of teachers so that they were less resistant to self-access language learning activities. Moving away from a more traditional teacher-fronted language course structure, the authors describe two specially prepared courses, dealing with speaking and writing, which had self-access language learning components:

Students taking the courses are required first to assess language needs, then plan, complete and evaluate 12 hours of independent learning activities outside class time. During the course, students have one-on-one or small group consultations with their teacher, during which they discuss their learning plan, learning style and appropriate learning strategies. By the end of the course, students compile a portfolio which demonstrates learning processes and outcomes. (Hafner and Young, 2007, p.105)

Hafner and Young (2007) also discovered that a large number of the teachers working on their courses had little or no experience in facilitating independent learning, and were, according to the authors, resistant to changing their teaching practices. In order to support these teachers an on-line professional development system was developed and implemented which required the teachers, while preparing to teach the course, to go through processes similar to those the students taking the courses would experience. This system was named WIILD (Web-based Induction and Independent Learning Development). The system worked in a series of learning and implementation loops. First of all, via a series of online quizzes

and information sheets, the teacher learned what independent learning consisted of and how it could be used by language learners. Then the teacher reflected on how effective independent learning was, how it could be modified to suit individual learners and what support the learner may need. Finally, the teacher was asked to consider, from a facilitator's perspective, how the information they have learned could be transferred to teaching the students on their courses.

After taking part in the WIILD teacher development process, the teachers were reported to have become more aware of what independent learning was and how they could help their students develop the skills required to become independent learners. They were also aware of how much they still had to learn about learner autonomy and that the concept of life-long learning was an important aspect of all language learners' skills. The change from a more traditional view of language teaching to one which encompassed SALL was reported by all the teachers who undertook the WIILD training. Hafner and Young's study illustrates that teachers not only need to be aware of SALL but they also need hands-on experience of what it actually is. In this way, they become situated learners (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and when this happens they begin to enter the periphery of the SALL community. However, the teachers who undertook the WIILD professional development were perhaps not deliberately attempting to join a group or community (as defined by Lave and Wenger, 1991), but used their personal experiences to identify more with teachers who promoted SALL. The next stage of these teachers' professional development and identity forming may be to share their expertise and practices with an interactive group (Wenger's 2006), and integrate themselves more with the principles and practices of self-access. In this way they will enter more fully into CoP membership.

5. Fostering a SALL Practitioners' Community of Practice

Although communities of practice emerge naturally to meet existing needs rather than being artificially established, it is possible to foster them through the implementation of measures based on the 7 principles proposed by Wenger et al. (2003) which are outlined above. In this way CoPs can be assured the best prospect of survival and development. Below are suggestions for applying the seven principles to the maintenance and development of a SALL practitioners' CoP, where possible we illustrate our suggestions with examples taken from the Hong Kong context:

Principle 1: Design for evolution

Organise the CoP relatively loosely. Provide some initial structure which allows it to function adequately while it is maturing but with enough flexibility for the structure to evolve to best meet the needs of the CoP's members. A lack of organisation is likely to frustrate members. Too much organisation is likely to stifle development. A successful CoP will be one in which its members decide how it functions. Members are likely to be teachers who have lots of organisational experience. SALL practitioners will value autonomy and may prefer not to be over-managed. The SALL CoP in Hong Kong (HASALD) has three main elected officials (mostly because that is a legal requirement) who share the work of organising the CoP. If anyone else offers to organise an event or provide a speaker their offer is welcomed. Protocol is not rigidly adhered to.

Principle 2: Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives

An insider-outsider dialogue could be encouraged by opening CoP meeting and other activities to non-members. Inviting teachers without experience of self-access learning to meetings is not only a potential way to explain ideas about autonomy but can also provide a reality-check for members. HASALD has an official membership (determined by those who

pay an annual fee) but it has such an open-door policy of allowing anyone to attend meetings or even to present at them that the insider-outsider dialogue is constant. Perhaps this policy reflects member's views about autonomy in that they leave individuals to decide for themselves whether they should become members.

Principle 3: Invite different levels of participation

CoPs work best when they contain an element of apprenticeship and/or mentoring. Encouraging the participation of more junior members can provide fresh blood in the field and an opportunity for senior members to pass on their knowledge. There is much complexity in the field of learner autonomy and a lot to be learned about, for example, language advising, materials production, and management of resources which can be best learned by on the job training. Within the Hong Kong CoP more experienced members collaborate with less experienced colleagues to conduct research and present findings at conferences.

Principle 4: Develop both public and private community spaces

A CoP should provide opportunities for members to meet en masse and for individuals or small groups to interact. Large interactions could be organised as conferences or seminars dedicated to sharing ideas and research about self-access learning. Equally CoP membership can provide opportunities for smaller-scale interactions perhaps in research projects or materials sharing. Ideally, the CoP will allow for up-scaling or down-scaling of interactions so a research project could develop into a paper shared at a CoP meeting or a conference, and a conference could provide opportunities for small interest groups to form. In Hong Kong regular CoP meetings are open to all members (public space) but specific projects initiated by CoP members may be on an invitation only basis (private space).

Principle 5: Focus on value

The SALL practitioners' CoP has to provide something that makes busy teachers value their membership. Value may be measured in different ways such as knowledge gained, materials shared or research opportunities revealed. A regular review of members' opinions about the value of membership will also help to keep it fresh. In the Hong Kong CoP the value in its early days was the exchange of information about how to establish and run a self-access centre. In today's very different CoP that would not be enough and its value tends to centre currently on the presentation of new and relevant research.

Principle 6: Combine familiarity and excitement

CoPs develop best with an appropriate balance of stability and innovation. In the Hong Kong context the framework within which SALL practitioners work has remained relatively constant but there have been changes to the delivery of SALL to its users. In the last twenty years delivery has moved beyond the confines of SACs into the virtual world and through integration into taught courses. This has presented exciting challenges which the CoP has supported its members in tackling.

Principle 7: Create a rhythm for the community

A CoP whose members all work to a similar timetable is indeed fortunate and this may be true for a SALL practitioners' CoP as most members are likely to be teachers in institutions with similar schedules. The CoP in Hong Kong is largely inactive during the summer and during the Christmas or Chinese New Year holidays because members are otherwise occupied. But for the rest of the year there are regular interactions between CoP members such as: HASALD seminars, hosting overseas visitors, research collaborations, conference attendance, and social interactions.

6. Conclusion

This paper has used evidence from data-based research and an example from the literature to explore the expressions of professional identity of the members of a SALL practitioners' CoP in Hong Kong. We show how membership is defined by shared understanding concepts and practices. We also show that the CoP arose and has been maintained by a variety of factors which relate to the seven principles of Wenger et al (2003). We argue that by conforming to these principles the CoP has had a relatively long and fruitful life and is likely to be sustainable into the future. Nurturing a strong SALL practitioners' CoP and encouraging teachers' membership of it contributes to the development of their professional identity.

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