

The negotiation of meaning, I have argued, is the level of discourse at which the concept of practice should be understood. The second piece of necessary groundwork is to associate practice with the formation of communities. By associating practice with community, I am not arguing that everything anybody might call a community is defined by practice or has a practice that is specific to it; nor that everything anybody might call practice is the defining property of a clearly specifiable community. A residential neighborhood, for instance, is often called “the community” but it is usually not a community of practice. Playing scales on the piano is often called practice – as in “practice makes perfect” – but it does not define what I would call a community of practice. Rather, I am claiming that associating practice and community does two things

- 1) It yields a more tractable characterization of the concept of practice – in particular, by distinguishing it from less tractable terms like culture, activity, or structure.
- 2) It defines a special type of community – a community of practice.

Because its constituent terms specify each other in this way, the term *community of practice* should be viewed as a unit. In Part I, when I use the term *community* or the term *practice* by itself, it is just an abbreviation to make the text less cumbersome. In Part II, however, things will become more complicated because I will start to talk about other types of communities.

To associate practice and community, I will describe three dimensions of the relation by which practice is the source of coherence of a community, as summarized in Figure 2.1:

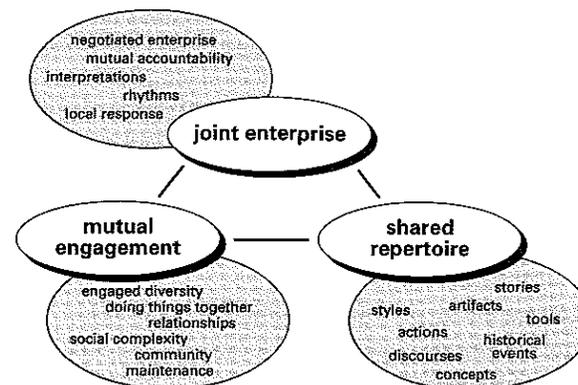


Figure 2.1. Dimensions of practice as the property of a community.

- 1) mutual engagement
- 2) a joint enterprise
- 3) a shared repertoire

I will spend the bulk of this chapter talking about each of these three dimensions of communities of practice, saying what they are and what they are not, and specifying what characteristics of practice and community they entail and do not entail.

### Mutual engagement

The first characteristic of practice as the source of coherence of a community is the mutual engagement of participants. Practice does not exist in the abstract. It exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another. In this sense, practice does not reside in books or in tools, though it may involve all kinds of artifacts. It does not reside in a structure that precedes it, though it does not start in a historical vacuum. The history of claims processing started long before Ariel and her colleagues arrived on the scene, and yet what they do together is not just a cookie-cutter realization of a historical schema. Practice resides in a community of people and the relations of mutual engagement by which they can do whatever they do.

Membership in a community of practice is therefore a matter of mutual engagement. That is what defines the community. A community

of practice is not just an aggregate of people defined by some characteristic. The term is not a synonym for group, team, or network.

- Membership is not just a matter of social category, declaring allegiance, belonging to an organization, having a title, or having personal relations with some people.
- A community of practice is not defined merely by who knows whom or who talks with whom in a network of interpersonal relations through which information flows.<sup>1</sup>
- Neither is geographical proximity sufficient to develop a practice. Of course, mutual engagement requires interactions, and geographical proximity can help. But it is not because claims processors work in the same office that they form a community of practice. It is because they sustain dense relations of mutual engagement organized around what they are there to do.

#### *Enabling engagement*

Whatever it takes to make mutual engagement possible is an essential component of any practice. For claims processors, for instance, coming to the office is a key element of their practice. So is being able (and allowed) to talk and interact while they work.<sup>2</sup> For a family, it can be having dinner together, taking trips on weekends, or cleaning the house on Saturdays. Given the right context, talking on the phone, exchanging electronic mail, or being connected by radio can all be part of what makes mutual engagement possible.

Being included in what matters is a requirement for being engaged in a community's practice, just as engagement is what defines belonging. What it takes for a community of practice to cohere enough to function can be very subtle and delicate. Certainly, for claims processors to work together, it is difficult to distinguish between the value of a specific piece of information and the value of the atmosphere of friendliness they create, or between bits of talk about work and the personal exchanges that are woven into their conversations. In order to be a full participant, it may just be as important to know and understand the latest gossip as it is to know and understand the latest memo.

The kind of coherence that transforms mutual engagement into a community of practice requires work. The work of "community maintenance" is thus an intrinsic part of any practice. It can, however, be much less visible than more instrumental aspects of that practice. As a

result, it is easily undervalued or even totally unrecognized. I described in Vignette I how Roberta helped make daily work more bearable for everyone by providing an endless supply of snacks. Her generosity contributed to building the community and keeping it going. But she never got a bonus for her tireless dedication. Even when there is much in common in the respective backgrounds of participants, the specific coordination necessary to do things together requires constant attention.

#### *Diversity and partiality*

If what makes a community of practice a community is mutual engagement, then it is a kind of community that does not entail homogeneity. Indeed, what makes engagement in practice possible and productive is as much a matter of diversity as it is a matter of homogeneity. Claims processors, for instance, form an ill-defined group of people brought together by employment ads in the classified sections of newspapers. Many applied for the job simply because the ad stipulated that no previous experience was necessary and that training would be provided. Hardly anyone ever mentioned a specific interest in medical insurance as a reason for being there. Some are young, some old; some conservative, some liberal; some outgoing, some introverted. They are different from one another and have different personal aspirations and problems. Thus, claims processing takes on a unique significance in each of their individual lives. Even so, their responses to dilemmas and aspirations are connected by the relations they create through mutual engagement. They work together, they see each other every day, they talk with each other all the time, exchange information and opinions, and very directly influence each other's understanding as a matter of routine. What makes a community of practice out of this medley of people is their mutual engagement in claims processing as they make it happen at Alinsu.

Not only are claims processors different to start with, but working together creates differences as well as similarities. They specialize, gain a reputation, make trouble, and distinguish themselves, as much as they develop shared ways of doing things. As an obvious example, the unit supervisor and assistant supervisor are undoubtedly members of the community of practice (they rose from the ranks and are still very engaged in the details of processing), but they have acquired very different status with respect to daily work, authority, and relations to the corporation. More generally, each participant in a community of practice

finds a unique place and gains a unique identity, which is both further integrated and further defined in the course of engagement in practice. These identities become interlocked and articulated with one another through mutual engagement, but they do not fuse.<sup>3</sup> Mutual relations of engagement are as likely to give rise to differentiation as to homogenization. Crucially, therefore, homogeneity is neither a requirement for, nor the result of, the development of a community of practice.

Mutual engagement involves not only our competence, but also the competence of others. It draws on what we do and what we know, as well as on our ability to connect meaningfully to what we don't do and what we don't know – that is, to the contributions and knowledge of others. In this sense, mutual engagement is inherently partial; yet, in the context of a shared practice, this partiality is as much a resource as it is a limitation. This is rather obvious when participants have different roles, as in a medical operating team, where mutual engagement involves *complementary* contributions. But it is also true among claims processors, who have largely *overlapping* forms of competence. Because they belong to a community of practice where people help each other, it is more important to know how to give and receive help than to try to know everything yourself.

In both types of communities, developing a shared practice depends on mutual engagement. Yet, the two types of communities have different effects because their practices are constituted by different relations of partiality among members. In fact, it is often useful to belong to both types at once in order to achieve the synergy of the two forms of engagement. For example, a specialist on a team made up of complementary competences will usually benefit from also belonging to a community of practice of peers who share their specialization.

### *Mutual relationships*

Mutual engagement does not entail homogeneity, but it does create relationships among people. When it is sustained, it connects participants in ways that can become deeper than more abstract similarities in terms of personal features or social categories. In this sense, a community of practice can become a very tight node of interpersonal relationships.

Because the term “community” is usually a very positive one,<sup>4</sup> I cannot emphasize enough that these interrelations arise out of engagement in practice and not out of an idealized view of what a community

should be like. In particular, connotations of peaceful coexistence, mutual support, or interpersonal allegiance are not assumed, though of course they may exist in specific cases. Peace, happiness, and harmony are therefore not necessary properties of a community of practice. Certainly there are plenty of disagreements, tensions, and conflicts among claims processors. In spite of Alinsu's rather successful “corporate culture” of personableness, there are jealousies, gossips, and cliques.

Most situations that involve sustained interpersonal engagement generate their fair share of tensions and conflicts. In some communities of practice, conflict and misery can even constitute the core characteristic of a shared practice, as they do in some dysfunctional families. A community of practice is neither a haven of togetherness nor an island of intimacy insulated from political and social relations. Disagreement, challenges, and competition can all be forms of participation. As a form of participation, rebellion often reveals a greater commitment than does passive conformity.

A shared practice thus connects participants to each other in ways that are diverse and complex. The resulting relations reflect the full complexity of doing things together. They are not easily reducible to a single principle such as power, pleasure, competition, collaboration, desire, economic relations, utilitarian arrangements, or information processing. In real life, mutual relations among participants are complex mixtures of power and dependence, pleasure and pain, expertise and helplessness, success and failure, amassment and deprivation, alliance and competition, ease and struggle, authority and collegiality, resistance and compliance, anger and tenderness, attraction and repugnance, fun and boredom, trust and suspicion, friendship and hatred. Communities of practice have it all.

### **Joint enterprise**

The second characteristic of practice as a source of community coherence is the negotiation of a joint enterprise. I will make three points about the enterprise that keeps a community of practice together.

- 1) It is the result of a 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. It is their negotiated response to their situation and thus belongs to them in a profound sense, in spite of all the forces and influences that are beyond their control.

- 3) It is not just a stated goal, but creates among participants relations of mutual accountability that become an integral part of the practice

*A negotiated enterprise*

The enterprises reflected in our practices are as complex as we are. They include the instrumental, the personal, and the interpersonal aspects of our lives. The practice of claims processors, for instance, reflects their attempt to create a context in which to proceed with their working lives. That involves, among other things, making money, being an adult, becoming proficient at claims processing, having fun, doing well, feeling good, not being naive, being personable, dealing with boredom, thinking about the future, keeping one's place. Although their job does not carry much status, claims processors struggle to maintain a sense of self they can live with. Toward this end, they carefully fold into their practice their sense of marginality with respect to the institution, cultivating a subdued cynicism and a tightly managed distance from the job and from the company.

Their enterprise, therefore, is not just to process claims, as defined by Alinsu or by the unit supervisor. Of course, claims processing so defined does enter into their practice as a very significant component. They endeavor to earn money by satisfying Alinsu's demand that claims processing take place. The supervisor is a symbol of that demand. But the enterprise as actually defined by claims processors through their mutual engagement in practice is much more complex because it includes all the energy they spend – within the stricture of their tight institutional context and also in spite of it – not only in making claims processing possible in practice, but also in making the place habitable for themselves. Their daily practice, with its mixture of submission and assertion, is a complex, collectively negotiated response to what they understand to be their situation.

Because mutual engagement does not require homogeneity, a joint enterprise does not mean agreement in any simple sense. In fact, in some communities, disagreement can be viewed as a productive part of the enterprise. The enterprise is joint not in that everybody believes the same thing or agrees with everything, but in that it is communally negotiated. To say that some claims processors share an enterprise is not merely to say that they share working conditions, that they have

dilemmas in common, or that they create similar responses. Their individual situations and responses vary, from one person to the next and from one day to the next. But their responses to their conditions – similar or dissimilar – are interconnected because they are engaged together in the joint enterprise of making claims processing real and livable. They must find a way to do that together, and even living with their differences and coordinating their respective aspirations is part of the process. Their understanding of their enterprise and its effects in their lives need not be uniform for it to be a collective product.

*An indigenous enterprise*

Communities of practice are not self-contained entities. They develop in larger contexts – historical, social, cultural, institutional – with specific resources and constraints. Some of these conditions and requirements are explicitly articulated. Some are implicit but are no less binding. Yet even when the practice of a community is profoundly shaped by conditions outside the control of its members, as it always is in some respects, its day-to-day reality is nevertheless produced by participants within the resources and constraints of their situations. It is their response to their conditions, and therefore *their* enterprise.

Calling attention to the claims processors' own definition of their enterprise is not to deny the following.

- 1) *Their position within a broader system.* Their job is part of a large industry and the result of a long historical development. They did not invent claims processing, nor do they have much influence on its institutional constitution.
- 2) *The pervasive influence of the institution that employs them.* The company's efforts to maintain control over their practice is mostly successful. The formidable shadow of Alinsu is ever-present. It follows them even to their lunch break, as they keep talking about their production quotas and their quality ratings.

Even though their practice does not transcend or transform its institutional conditions in any dramatic fashion, it nonetheless responds to these conditions in ways that are not determined by the institution. To do what they are expected to do, the claims processors produce a practice with an inventiveness that is all theirs. Their inventive resourcefulness applies equally to what the company probably wants and to what it probably does not want.

- On the one hand, claims processors invent local ways of processing claims effectively – for instance, as Ariel learns from Nancy in Vignette I, by finding more or less appropriate categories under which they can classify cases in order to proceed rapidly. Their pragmatic resourcefulness sometimes surprised me in my newcomer's eagerness to be thorough, but I had to admit that the job could not reasonably get done without it.
- On the other hand, and with the same inventive resourcefulness, they devise ways to escape Alinsu's control (e.g., with the treatment of errors in "Q" claims as described in Vignette I). They also learn to create some space for themselves. Even while processing information, and even while looking at the clock, they do manage to have fun, to feel hopeless, to laugh at an accident report, to share their boredom, to be angry at a customer, to spread rumors, to discuss their views, to enjoy a snack, to be proud of a processing prowess, to exchange stories, to feel the pain of uncertainty, to be alive

In sum, it is only as negotiated by the community that conditions, resources, and demands shape the practice. The enterprise is never fully determined by an outside mandate, by a prescription, or by any individual participant. Even when a community of practice arises in response to some outside mandate, the practice evolves into the community's own response to that mandate. Even when specific members have more power than others, the practice evolves into a communal response to that situation. Even when strict submission is the response, its form and its interpretation in practice must be viewed as a local collective creation of the community. Because members produce a practice to deal with what they understand to be their enterprise, their practice as it unfolds belongs to their community in a fundamental sense.

Again, saying that communities of practice produce their practice is not saying that they cannot be influenced, manipulated, duped, intimidated, exploited, debilitated, misled, or coerced into submission; nor is it saying that they cannot be inspired, helped, supported, enlightened, unshackled, or empowered. But it is saying that the power – benevolent or malevolent – that institutions, prescriptions, or individuals have over the practice of a community is always mediated by the community's production of its practice. External forces have no direct power over this production because, in the last analysis (i.e., in the doing through mutual engagement in practice), it is the community that negotiates its enterprise.

### *A regime of mutual accountability*

The enterprise of a community of practice is not just a statement of purpose. In fact, it is not primarily by being reified that it animates the community. Negotiating a joint enterprise gives rise to relations of mutual accountability among those involved. These relations of accountability include what matters and what does not, what is important and why it is important, what to do and not to do, what to pay attention to and what to ignore, what to talk about and what to leave unsaid, what to justify and what to take for granted, what to display and what to withhold, when actions and artifacts are good enough and when they need improvement or refinement.

I have argued that, for claims processors, accountability to their enterprise includes not only processing claims but also being personable, treating information and resources as something to be shared, and being responsible to others by not making their lives more difficult. Responsibility with respect to what makes life harder for others, for instance, is something they enforce among themselves, sometimes quite vocally, because they all understand that making their work life bearable is part of their joint enterprise. That these relations of mutual accountability are sometimes taken to be violated only confirms their influence as a communal regime.<sup>5</sup>

This communal regime of mutual accountability plays a central role in defining the circumstances under which, as a community and as individuals, members feel concerned or unconcerned by what they are doing and what is happening to them and around them, and under which they attempt, neglect, or refuse to make sense of events and to seek new meanings.

While some aspects of accountability may be reified – rules, policies, standards, goals – those that are not are no less significant. Becoming good at something involves developing specialized sensitivities, an aesthetic sense, and refined perceptions that are brought to bear on making judgments about the qualities of a product or an action. That these become shared in a community of practice is what allows participants to negotiate the appropriateness of what they do.<sup>6</sup>

The regime of accountability becomes an integral part of the practice. As a result, it may not be something that anyone can articulate very readily, because it is not primarily by being reified that it pervades a community.<sup>7</sup> Even when the enterprise is reified into a statement, the practice evolves into a negotiated interpretation of that statement. In

fact, the practice includes the ways that participants interpret reified aspects of accountability and integrate them into lived forms of participation. Being able to make distinctions between reified standards and competent engagement in practice is an important aspect of becoming an experienced member.<sup>8</sup>

Defining a joint enterprise is a process, not a static agreement. It produces relations of accountability that are not just fixed constraints or norms. These relations are manifested not as conformity but as the ability to negotiate actions as accountable to an enterprise. The whole process is as generative as it is constraining. It pushes the practice forward as much as it keeps it in check. An enterprise both engenders and directs social energy. It spurs action as much as it gives it focus. It involves our impulses and emotions as much as it controls them. It invites new ideas as much as it sorts them out. An enterprise is a resource of coordination, of sense-making, of mutual engagement; it is like rhythm to music.

Rhythm is not random, but it is not just a constraint either. Rather, it is part of the dynamism of music, coordinating the very process by which it comes into being. Extracted from the playing, it becomes fixed, sterile, and meaningless, but in the playing, it makes music interpretable, participative, and sharable. It is a constitutive resource intrinsic to the very possibility of music as a shared experience. An enterprise is part of practice in the same way that rhythm is part of music.

### Shared repertoire

The third characteristic of practice as a source of community coherence is the development of a shared repertoire. Over time, the joint pursuit of an enterprise creates resources for negotiating meaning. In claims processing, medical terms take on a specific usage, the height of certain piles of paper on desks indicates the state of processing, the seating arrangement reflects relationships among people and reactions of management to these relationships. The enterprise of claims processing is what gives coherence to the medley of activities, relations, and objects involved. That is why claim forms on the computer and photos of dogs on the wall can be part of the same practice. That is why taking a spelling test and shooting spitballs can be part of the same practice. The elements of the repertoire can be very heterogeneous. They gain their coherence not in and of themselves as specific activities, symbols, or artifacts, but from the fact that they belong to the practice of a community pursuing an enterprise.

The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres,<sup>9</sup> actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice. The repertoire combines both reificative and participative aspects. It includes the discourse by which members create meaningful statements about the world, as well as the styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identities as members.

### *Negotiation: history and ambiguity*

I call a community's set of shared resources a *repertoire* to emphasize both its rehearsed character and its availability for further engagement in practice.<sup>10</sup> The repertoire of a practice combines two characteristics that allow it to become a resource for the negotiation of meaning:

- 1) it reflects a history of mutual engagement
- 2) it remains inherently ambiguous

Histories of interpretation create shared points of reference, but they do not impose meaning. Things like words, artifacts, gestures, and routines are useful not only because they are recognizable in their relation to a history of mutual engagement, but also because they can be re-engaged in new situations. This is true of linguistic and nonlinguistic elements, of words as well as chairs, ways of walking, claim forms, or laughter.<sup>11</sup> All have well-established interpretations, which can be re-utilized to new effects, whether these new effects simply continue an established trajectory of interpretation or take it in unexpected directions.

The fact that actions and artifacts have recognizable histories of interpretation is not exclusively, or even primarily, a constraint on possible meanings, but also a resource to be used in the production of new meanings. The spontaneous creation of metaphors is a perfect example of the kind of resource provided by a renegotiable history of usage. When combined with history, ambiguity is not an absence or a lack of meaning. Rather, it is a condition of negotiability and thus a condition for the very possibility of meaning. It is how history remains both relevant and meaningful.

### *Resources of mutual engagement*

This inherent ambiguity makes processes like coordination, communication, or design on the one hand difficult, in continual need

of repair, and always unpredictable; and on the other hand, dynamic, always open-ended, and generative of new meanings. The need for coordinating perspectives is a source of new meanings as much as it is a source of obstacles. From this perspective, ambiguity is not simply an obstacle to overcome; it is an inherent condition to be put to work. Effective communication or good design, therefore, are not best understood as the literal transmission of meaning. It is useless to try to excise all ambiguity; it is more productive to look for social arrangements that put history and ambiguity to work. The real problem of communication and design then is to situate ambiguity in the context of a history of mutual engagement that is rich enough to yield an opportunity for negotiation.

Because the repertoire of a community is a resource for the negotiation of meaning, it is shared in a dynamic and interactive sense. In particular, shared beliefs – in the sense of same mental objects or models – are not what shared practice is about.<sup>12</sup> Agreement in the sense of literally shared meaning is not a precondition for mutual engagement in practice, nor is it its outcome. Indeed, mismatched interpretations or misunderstandings need to be addressed and resolved directly only when they interfere with mutual engagement. Even then, they are not merely problems to resolve, but occasions for the production of new meanings. Sustained engagement in shared practice is a dynamic form of coordination, one that generates “on the fly” the coordinated meanings that allow it to proceed.

### Negotiating meaning in practice

A community of practice need not be reified as such to be a community: it enters into the experience of participants through their very engagement. The three dimensions discussed here need not be the focus of explicit attention to create a context for the negotiation of meaning.

- 1) Through mutual engagement, participation and reification can be seamlessly interwoven.
- 2) A joint enterprise can create relations of mutual accountability without ever being reified, discussed, or stated as an enterprise.
- 3) Shared histories of engagement can become resources for negotiating meaning without the constant need to “compare notes.”

Still, most of us have experienced the kind of social energy that the combination of these three dimensions of shared practice can generate.

Conversely, we may also have experienced how this social energy can prevent us from responding to new situations or from moving on. The importance of our various communities of practice can thus be manifested in two ways: their ability to give rise to an experience of meaningfulness; and, conversely, to hold us hostages to that experience.

As a consequence, saying that communities of practice provide a privileged context for the negotiation of meaning should not be misconstrued as romanticizing them.

- 1) I have insisted that shared practice does not itself imply harmony or collaboration.
- 2) Moreover, asserting as I have that these kinds of communities produce their own practices is not asserting that communities of practice are in any essential way an emancipatory force.

The local coherence of a community of practice can be both a strength and a weakness. The indigenous production of practice makes communities of practice the locus of creative achievements and the locus of inbred failures; the locus of resistance to oppression and the locus of the reproduction of its conditions; the cradle of the self but also the potential cage of the soul.

Communities of practice are not intrinsically beneficial or harmful. They are not privileged in terms of positive or negative effects. Yet they are a force to be reckoned with, for better or for worse. As a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises, such communities hold the key to real transformation – the kind that has real effects on people’s lives. From this perspective, the influence of other forces (e.g., the control of an institution or the authority of an individual) are no less important, but they must be understood as mediated by the communities in which their meanings are to be negotiated in practice.