Groupthink Revisited:
Communities of Practice, In-groups, Out-groups and the Space Between

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Abstract

This paper revisits Irving Janis' theory of groupthink in the light of the ongoing debate on legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. We argue for a movement in perception from the linear development of community formation to a multi-dimensional model based upon the inter-relationship of the domains of community, practice, meaning, and identity. Janis' theory of groupthink is outlined and communities of practice defined. From these definitions, we go on to examine the significance of in-groups and out-groups, applying Janis' model to patterns of collaboration and situated learning.

1. Introduction

Communities of practice consist of particular groups of people who share a common set of values concerning learning, meaning and identity. They demonstrate many of the characteristics of other groups in their capacity to create collective knowledge; however, this collective knowledge is shared through practice and it is this which differentiates them from other groups.

Groups are not static by nature, they are constantly forming, disbanding and reforming in a state of flux, which creates a propensity to feel either inside or outside a particular group. An individual can also be an insider in a number of groups at the same time as being an outsider in others. As a result of this reality, there have been a number of attempts to analyse the development of groups and their phases of development (Lipnack and Stamps 1997; Belbin 2000).

Wenger's model of phases of development of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1997; Wenger 1998; Wenger 2000; Wenger et al 2002), that is potential, coalescing, maturing, stewarding and legacy, adopts a linear view of this change. This appears paradoxical when compared with the multi-dimensional view of the concepts of participation and reification which are put forward in other parts of Wenger's work. Any linear view of the development, sharing and transferring of knowledge lends itself to images of eccentric scientists, working alone, who then link to other eccentric scientists to

create projects which attempt to solve complex problems. These images are as far from reality today as they ever were.

Some commentators (Snowden 2000; Snowden 2002; Mutch 2003), on the other hand, offering critiques of Wenger's schema, have attempted to build what appear to be knowledge ecology and cognitive models of community development to compensate for this linear view. Snowden's work emphasises the significance of knowledge-sharing spaces and the ecological links between them; Mutch examines Wenger in the light of Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus'. Habitus is an internalised set of dispositions, which an individual transports between differing learning environments and, in turn, impacts upon individual and collective learning. Mutch examined communities of practice of publicans in the UK and discovered that they possessed an identifiable set of competencies and transferable skills, which they brought to groups in varying ways. These core skills appeared to change little as individuals moved from group to group.

What is clear from the work of Wenger and his critics, however, is that communities of practice do change, progress through differing phases of development, are subject to a series of dynamic core-periphery relations and view peripheral participation as a legitimate part of community of practice activity.

In order to test change within communities of practice, the authors of this paper have revisited Irving Janis' (1972) theory of 'groupthink' in an attempt to examine the hypothesis that:

> *Within groups there is a tendency to operate in such a way which serves to exclude those outside the group.*

The first part of the paper defines the concept of groupthink and highlights the relevance of the groupthink test to the hypothesis. The second part of the paper defines and examines the concept of communities of practice. The paper then examines the significance of in-groups and out-groups, the terms used by Janis to refer to insiders and outsiders within the group. This is followed by an examination of how the space between in-groups and out-groups is manipulated. The next section tests the hypothesis against the theory of groupthink. Finally, the conclusion examines how the work to date might be progressed by others and suggests a number of strategies to avoid groupthink.

2. Groupthink

Irving Janis first coined the term groupthink in 1972 when considering a range of psychological case studies of 'fiascoes', such as, the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Cuban Missile crisis. He was struck by the high degree of miscalculations of those involved in the fiascoes and the inability of those involved to think outside the confines of the group. Hence, the term groupthink.

He went on to define the term as follows:

> I use the term “groupthink” as a quick and easy way to refer to a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action…Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.
>
> Janis (1972): 9

What is relevant in the above quote to this paper are the key components of groupthink and how they may be applied and tested against in-groups and out-groups within communities of practice.

Groupthink compounds the following four key socio-psychological components which are particularly relevant to building successful communities of practitioners:

1. a mode of thinking;
2. personal involvement in a cohesive group;
3. a search for unanimity;
4. a failure to appraise alternative courses of action.

Janis goes on to outline eight symptoms of groupthink, which are preceded by a range of antecedent conditions which its context. This leads to a concurrence-seeking tendency, which effects decision-making leading to a low probability of successful outcomes.

The eight symptoms of groupthink are:

1. Illusion of invulnerability: the group are incapable of being wrong.
2. Rationalisation: the group’s end justifies the means.
3. Inherent morality: the group feel what they are doing is best for everyone.
4. Stereotypical thinking: the group employs preconceived notions in evaluating information.
5. Mind guards: group members who take it upon themselves to protect the group from information that contradicts prevailing opinion.
6. Pressure on dissenters: group members aggressively "go after" colleagues who disagree with the general sentiments of the group.
7. Self-censorship: group members willingly refrain from voicing opposition to the prevailing sentiments of the group.
8. Illusion of unanimity: the belief, within the group, that silence is an indication of agreement.

Such symptoms will be familiar to anyone with personal experience of working in a project-based or task-orientated group. They are frequently rationalised by victims of groupthink by the use of glib phrases, such as:

"Better to be inside the tent looking (sic) out;
than outside the tent looking (sic) in!"

3. Communities of practice

> Perhaps most intriguing, communities of practice are responsible only to themselves, no one owns them. There's no boss. They are like professional societies. People join and stay because they have something to learn and contribute. The work they do is the joint and several property of the group – cosa nostra, 'our thing'.
>
> Stewart, T.A. (1996) The Invisible Key to Success Fortune 134: 173-6

There are many definitions of communities of practice both similar to and varying from the above [1]. The following definition, however, drafted by one of the authors of this paper, attempts to combine several of them:

> Communities of practice are groups that share knowledge, learn together and create common practice. They demonstrate shared mental models, a common culture of information sharing and a sense of community that enables learning.

From this definition can be derived six critical success factors for an effective community of practice (Wenger 1998; Wenger et al 2002):

1. Sharing knowledge.
2. Learning together.
3. Creating common practices.
4. Sharing mental models.
5. Having a common culture of information sharing.
6. Displaying a sense of community that enables learning.

While it is possible to say that all groups exhibit one or more of the above characteristics only communities of practice appear to exhibit all simultaneously and strive to retain them through the deployment of particular methods of discourse, participation and reification.

Methods of discourse, participation and reification, within a community of practice, are manifest in a number of ways but the central premise is that such a community is a 'learning community'. This process of learning is apparent in terms of a sense of community, practice, meaning and identity as follows:

1. Community: learning as belonging.
2. Practice: learning as doing.
3. Meaning: learning as experience.
4. Identity: learning as becoming.

Finally, key to the understanding of communities of practice is the concept of legitimate peripheral participation:

> Learning viewed as situated activity has its central defining characteristic a process that we call legitimate peripheral participation. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skills requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community.
>
> Lave &Wenger (1997): 1

Such analysis of communities of practice would tend to suggest that they are not only potential problem solving phenomena but also satisfy socio-psychological and cognitive needs in their members. This suggests that a community of practice may well conform to Janis' concept of an in-group.

4. In-groups and out-groups

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary describes an in-group as "an exclusive group of people with a shared interest or identity" and an out-group as "those who do not belong to an in-group". Such definitions are useful as they imply that the in-group defines the out-group rather than the out-group defining the in-group. In effect, the in-group has formed a bond of community that excludes the out-group.

If we follow the Janis model of groupthink, the group not only defines the characteristics of in-group, as follows:

- No two members are alike, but all members have something in common.
- Members know each other by name.
- The group's strength is in its diversity.
- Members are interesting people.
- Members enjoy being with each other.
- Our group is superior to other groups.
- We're superior to members of other groups.

But also, defines the characteristics of the associated out-groups:

- Members seem to be all the same.
- We define them stereotypically, not as individuals.
- They're different from us.
- We have little in common with them.
- We do not enjoy being with them.
- Their group is inferior to ours.
- Their members are inferior to us.

Wenger, cutting across the specifics of in- and out-groups, talks of community space in which groups operate (Figure One). The facilitators, innovators and leaders occupy the core space. Active, interested individuals inhabit the active space. Interested individuals, who are not necessarily active, occupy peripheral space and the transactional space is where partnerships are forged. This paradigm suggests the existence of four distinct community spaces rather than in-groups and out-groups. It does not, however, explain how groups apparently move, with ease, from one space to another or alternatively occupy several spaces simultaneously. For example, individuals may well occupy core space in one group, active space in another and so on.

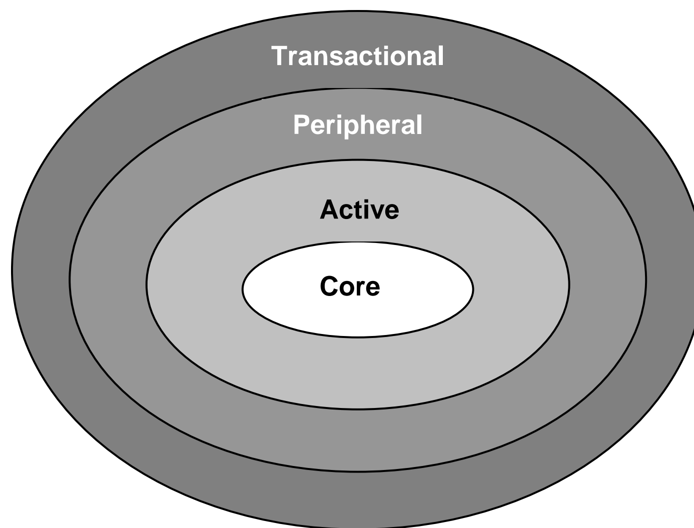

Figure One: Community Space

Lefebvre's (1991) discourse on the relationship between mental and physical space highlights not only the production of space but also the reproduction of space:

> The problematic of space, which subsumes the problems of the urban sphere…and of everyday life, has displaced the problematic of industrialisation. It has not, however, destroyed that earlier set of problems: the social relationships that obtained previously still obtain; the new problem is, precisely, the problem of their reproduction.
>
> Lefebvre (1991): 89

What is the impact of physical and mental spaces upon group behaviour? Winston Churchill went some way to expressing the relationship when he said:

> There is no doubt whatever about the influence of architecture and structure upon human character. We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.

From the idea of human structures, Goffman (1959) derived the concept of 'defensible space', the cognitive space between individuals where they form opinions and assumptions of others. In physical space we can visibly assess people's changing opinions through human interaction which is supported by body language. In cyberspace, however, where body language can play a different part, defensible space becomes the space of legitimate peripheral participation. Discourse and dialogue in cyberspace can often viewed as significantly more reflective that that which takes place in physical space. Dialogue in physical space frequently exhibiting more intuitive characteristics than those exhibited in cyberspace.

By introducing the concept of 'liminal' space, we can envisage how individuals might possibly journey between the spaces outlined above.

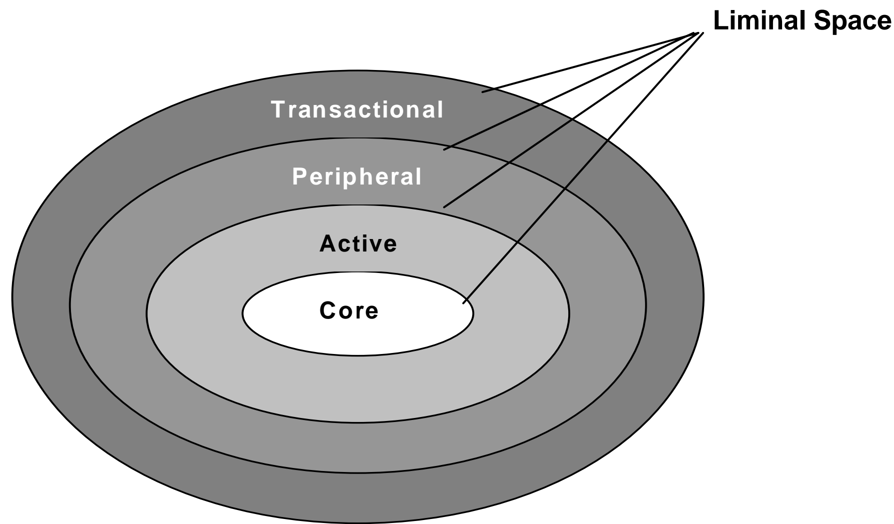

Figure Two: Liminal Space

Liminal space, an anthropological term, refers to the 'limbo' which an individual inhabits while performing a rite of passage between one space and another. A physical example of this space is the Aboriginal 'Walkabout' where teenage aborigines must spend time alone surviving in the outback prior to acceptance as an adult member of the group. A comparison can be made here with the concept of a 'lurker' in an electronic environment. 'Lurking' in an electronic environment would be considered a form of situated learning by Lave and Wenger, and, as such a legitimate form of peripheral participation. Adding the concept of liminal space to the paradigm creates a new dynamic, which does, at least, appear to go some way towards illustrating how individuals and groups occupy several spaces simultaneously.

Castells (1989) argues that access to flows of information and resources is the key to participation in the networked society. He refers to a subtle interaction between physically co-located resources and information-based resources. He calls this space 'the space of flows' (Figure Three).

Castells suggests a further dimension to group space. The space of flows being the personal space which individuals manipulate in and around the groups they populate. They create this space by constructing complex problem-solving personalised social networks. These networks manipulate information and resources on a personal level through a complex web of digital technologies and face-to-face interaction.

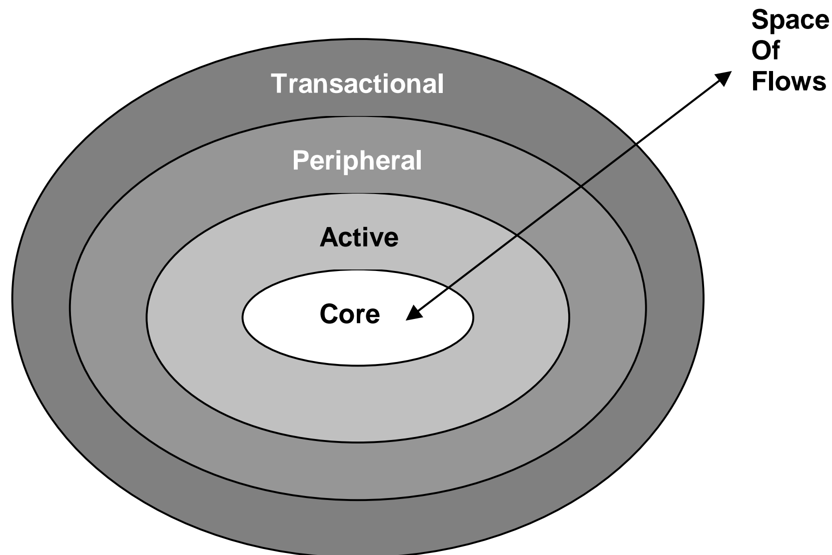

Figure Three: The Space of Flows

Lash (2002) interprets the global space to which Castells refers as a space where a new form of semiotics is emerging. Global economic organisation has created a myriad of symbols which signify the economic worth of products, such as, the Nike 'swoosh' while countercultures use other symbols to signify their cultural differentiation, such as, the Napster logo of a 'cool' cat with headphones.

This signification process means that groups are subject to high levels of interpretative semiotics which impact upon group behaviour.

5. Manipulating space: communities of practice and core-periphery relations

If we return to Janis' conditions of groupthink, it is possible to formulate a matrix (Figure Four) by which we can demonstrate the manifestations of groupthink in communities of practice, groups and cliques. This matrix begins to draw out the differences between communities, groups and cliques operating in the spaces mentioned above. The concept of a clique provides a useful unit of comparison to communities of practice and groups as cliques can potentially exist both within in-groups and out-groups.

This matrix offers a very basic understanding of the complexity of group behaviour

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Manifestation	Group	Clique	Community of Practice
1. Illusion of invulnerability	*Feeling of comfort and security*	*Demonstration of blind faith*	*Innovative, pioneering and impassioned*
2. Belief in inherent morality of the group	*Well- motivated*	*Openly fanatical*	*Doing things which need to be done*
3. Collective rationalisation	*See things the same way*	*Can't think for themselves*	*Generalises from its collective skills and experience*
4. Stereotypes of out-groups	*Know who they are*	*Overtly prejudiced*	*Realises the existence of other communities but sees them as protective of other values*
5. Self-censorship.	*Demonstrate loyalty*	*Afraid to say what they think*	*Knows what needs to be shared and at what level*
6. Illusion of unanimity	*Know each other's minds*	*"Brainwashed"*	*Realises consensus is transient*
7. Direct pressure on dissenters	*Exhibit loyalty*	*Coerce other members*	*Accepts difference of opinion but not to its detriment*
8. Self-appointed mindguards	*S/he keeps us focused*	*Thought police*	*Accepts the pedagogic role of veterans*

Figure Four: Manifestation of Groupthink in Communities, Groups and Cliques

6. Testing the hypothesis

The original hypothesis of this paper was:-

Within groups there is a tendency to operate in such a way which serves to exclude those outside the group.

The Janis' model appears to reduce group behaviour to a function of political behaviour where differences of opinion are often categorised as 'for' or 'against' a particular proposition. This is perhaps unsurprising given the highly politically charged context of the case studies utilised by Janis.

What this paper serves to demonstrate is that the division of groups into in-groups and out–groups in a post-industrial, post-modern society oversimplifies the complexity of information and knowledge sharing spaces and networks which populate such a society.

Wenger's community space paradigm offers an initial delineation of group space but fails, due to the underlying linearity of group change, to explain the dynamics of individual and group interaction.

Lefebvre's discourse highlights the relationship between mental and physical space and the implications of this for the reproduction of space.

Goffman's concept of 'defensible space' assists in understanding the relationship between physical space and cyberspace.

The concept of liminal space is of use when attempting to identify at what level and when legitimate peripheral participation is taking place in group space.

If we add Castells concept on the space of flows to the above we begin to understand the complexity of in-groups and out-groups within the dynamics of information and knowledge sharing resources which are prevalent in the networked society.

Finally, Lash identifies a post-modern semiotics, which impacts upon global space and, in turn, upon group patterns of behavioure.

Given the above, any answer to the hypothesis proves difficult in the light of this paper. The paper, however, does serve to illustrate the complexity of group behaviour, which is compounded by individuals operating severally within groups that are rich and complex in information and knowledge resources.

7. Conclusion: the way forward

The complexity of this area of investigation suggests a need for in-depth case studies of group and community-building behaviour. Such studies could be of co-located, dispersed or varied communities (those that choose to operate as both co-located and dispersed). These studies could also examine, in greater detail, the significance of both 'liminal' space, the reproduction of space, defensible space, 'the space of flows' and the semiotics of global space to communities of practice.

The discourse of this paper has helped to suggest a number of strategies in the minds of the authors, which can be deployed in order to prevent groupthink.

Below is a list of strategies, which is by no means exhaustive:

1. Establish an 'open' climate within the group. Welcome diversity, innovation and the embrace the pedagogy of trust.
2. Avoid the isolation of the group. Particularly from those groups which are critical of it.
3. Assign the role of critical evaluator to an experienced and skilled member of the group.
4. Avoid being too directive or prescriptive in terms of the development of the group.

5. The group leader should avoid expressing their personal views too early in the decision-making process.
6. The group leader should encourage group members to challenge and push each other for the purpose of enhancing each others' critical thinking.
7. The group should utilise procedural strategies for reaching group decisions within a "competitive" work environment:-

(i) Dialectical inquiry method: the group attempts to reach a decision by developing two different recommendations, based on contrary assumptions, from the same data; then subjecting those competing recommendations to in-depth, critical evaluation through a debate between two advocate subgroups.

(ii) Devil's advocacy method: the group attempts to reach a decision by developing a recommendation and solid supporting argument for it; then subjecting it to in-depth, critical evaluation by a designated advocate who attempts to show why the recommendation should not be accepted.

Notes

1. The following definitions were considered when formulating the definition for this paper:-
   “There are many shades of definition of this concept, but we define it as a group of professionals, informally bound to one another through exposure to a common class of problems, common pursuit of solutions, and thereby themselves embodying a store of knowledge."
   Peter & Trudy Johnson-Lenz, Awakening Technology
   "Communities of Practice is a phrase coined by researchers who studied the ways in which people naturally work and play together. In essence, communities of practice are groups of people who share similar goals and interests. In pursuit of these goals and interests, they employ common practices, work with the same tools and express themselves in a common language. Through such common activity, they come to hold similar beliefs and value systems”
   Collaborative Visualization (CoVis) Project
   “They are peers in the execution of 'real work'. What holds them together is a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows. There are many communities of practice within a single company, and most people belong to more than one of them. “
   John Seely Brown
   “A community of practice is "a diverse group of people engaged in real work over a significant period of time during which they build things, solve problems, learn and invent...in short, they evolve a practice that is highly skilled and highly creative."
   Robert Bauer, Ph.D., Director of Strategic Competency Development, Xerox PARC, in Customer Inspired Innovation: Creating the Future
   “More than a "community of learners," a community of practice is also a "community that learns." Not merely peers exchanging ideas around the water cooler, sharing and benefitting from each other's expertise, but colleagues committed to jointly develop better practices.”
   George Pór, Community Intelligence Labs

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