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Conferences as lifelong learning sites: Engaging with different communities of practice

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ABSTRACT

Conferences can be understood as important lifelong learning sites for adults engaged in a variety of pursuits. As conferences often draw together people to focus on a particular topic, whether it relates to workplace learning, leisure, or health, they may be seen as avenues for fostering what Wenger (1998) terms as “communities of practice”. This paper explores how lifelong learning at conferences is linked to the members of a community of practice, the organization of the event, and the effects of new technologies.

Most people in Western societies have attended conferences of some kind or another over the course of their lifespan. Conferences are used as lifelong learning sites for individuals interested in learning more about issues pertaining to their workplace or profession, for people to come together to explore issues regarding health, leisure or spirituality, and for students and educators to investigate topics related to their particular discipline. Despite the preponderance of conferences, however, very little research has actually been conducted to explore the opportunities that these events provide for participants and presenters to engage in lifelong learning. This paper begins with a brief overview of related literature and provides a short description of the small-scale qualitative study that was carried out to investigate this topic. Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice is briefly overviewed and then the findings from this study are discussed to argue that conferences may have an important role in creating communities of practice that can support valuable learning experiences.

Literature Review

Schuetze (2006) articulates four main aspects of lifelong learning as defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD); 1) that it should take into account various learner needs, 2) that learning takes place in many settings, 3) that it is often self-directed, and

4) that it occurs over the lifespan. These characteristics are reflective of learning connected to conferences, as they provide opportunities for people to engage in lifelong learning in a variety of contexts and participation is usually voluntary. At numerous stages in life, individuals may attend different kinds of conferences to network with various groups and engage in learning around assorted topics that may relate to their personal life or professional interests.

While conferences are widely used in a variety of different fields, and numerous papers provide a summary of talks given at particular conferences (Coate & Tooher, 2010; Landsberger, 2007), little research has been conducted to determine how learning occurs, how it can be supported, and how challenges around fostering conferences as learning sites may be addressed. A couple of examples of papers that do this include Cherrstrom (2012), who argues that conferences provide important opportunities for learning one's way into networking and becoming an academic, while Hersh, Hiro & Asarnow (2011) discuss the value of developing an undergraduate literature conference because by “bringing students to the conference ‘table’ make more transparent and accessible the sort of work we do” (p. 398). Generally, however, there has been minimal analysis around the kinds of issues that conference organizers might want to take into consideration when attempting to foster learning at conferences. These concerns include assessing the types of non-formal learning contexts that are most effective (hence, perhaps, the preponderance of “stand and deliver” types of formats), the benefits and challenges of fostering informal learning and networking opportunities, and the value (or lack thereof) in using conferences to disseminate information.

The Study

This paper overviews the findings from a small scale internally funded SSHRC study which included an examination of conferences in three different areas that have various stakeholders and formats, and span learning opportunities

that cross over in different areas, including the paid workplace, leisure, and scholarship. These areas are a) mystery writing conferences, b) adult education academic conferences, and c) golf course superintendent conferences.

The study involved interviews with six “key informants” – individuals in leadership positions who were involved in organizing conferences in these areas. Participants were selected through a purposive sampling strategy (Cresswell, 2008). They were approached by email initially and provided with an information package about the research study that included the letter of informed consent. All but one interview was conducted face-to-face – the last interview was conducted with a person that had spoken to the principal researcher at the conference, but preferred to the do interview by telephone at a follow-up time.

All participants were given three options around using their identity; a) complete disclosure of their name and identity and the organization that they were involved with for the purpose of organizing the conference; b) disclosure of their name and identity and the organization that they were involved with for the purpose of organizing the conference but with the option to select out particular quotes that would not be attributed to them, thus maintaining partial confidentiality; and c) complete confidentiality where the name and identity of the individual as well as the name/identifying aspects of the organization would not be revealed. Participants selected all of the different options, and to ensure the confidentiality of participants, in some instances identifying factors from their conversation are screened out.

To develop the analysis, we drew upon Wenger’s theories regarding “communities of practice” and reviewed the transcripts several times through a grounded theory approach. From this we distilled three themes to focus on for the discussion in this paper; 1) member of communities of practice; 2) organizing the event; and 3) new technologies. The paper concludes by summarizing some of the considerations of understanding adult learning at conferences.

Communities of Practice

As O’Donnell & Tobell (2007) note “communities of practice emerged from Lave & Wenger’s (1991) work on participation as learning...[in which] learning is positioned as embedded in wider social and historical practices, which interact to generate valued practices within a given community” (p. 315). Learning is not perceived to be an isolated, individual activity, but rather something that evolves within a broader cultural and historical context. Wenger’s (1998) research on “communities of practice” provides a helpful analytical approach for this study, as “the primary focus of this theory is on learning as social participation” (p. 5). As Wenger explains, what participants in communities of practice learn “is not a static subject matter but the very practice of being engaged in and participating in an ongoing practice” (p. 95). Conferences are inherently designed to be social learning sites, whereby participants are provided with multiple opportunities to engage in learning through a combination of presentations at organized sessions and

casual conversations in social contexts that are woven into the conference event. These casual conversations often provide valuable informal learning opportunities for individuals to exchange ideas and learn from one another.

Wenger (1998) explains that his understanding of ‘communities of practice’ evolves from a social theory of learning based on four basic assumptions; a) that humans learn as social beings; b) that learning involves developing competencies or capabilities in areas that are deemed to have value or importance; c) that learning entails “active engagement” or a concentrated involvement in the learning process; and d) that learning is intricately connected to our intent to make meaning or sense of the world we live in (p. 4). The notion of communities of practice has garnered great interest in the fields of adult education/lifelong learning, and has been used particularly in understanding learning within the workplace. In fact, the main example that Wenger uses to explain his model involves a detailed ethnographic study of an insurance company, where through observation he noted the multiple, subtle ways in which learning occurs through everyday exchanges of information in mostly informal contexts. However, conferences also serve additional audiences, which may involve learning in connection to leisure, spirituality, parenting, or health.

Members of a Community of Practice

Conferences are often designed to draw together people from a variety of different backgrounds who have a shared interest in a particular subject. For example, at golf course superintendent conferences superintendents seek education about turf management, environmental practices, and staffing/organizational issues; academics present on recent research; partners of attendees take advantage of travel and leisure activities, salespeople demonstrate equipment and services at the accompanying trades show; and students come to seek employment and educational opportunities. Summarizing this, one participant explained:

So I’ll use 2013 as an example and it’s fairly typical of the group from a logistics point. We had about 1500 people involved in total in Toronto. Approximately 475 of those were from the vendor side, so from the industry side...so about a third. We had approximately 35 speakers who may also be delegates and about 1000 delegates over all. The break-down of those is probably about 100 who were either equipment technicians, foreman, laborers, that kind of group that work within the golf course management component but at an employee level as opposed to a management level. The other 900 would fall in some kind of management component of a golf course. This year we probably had another 40 or 50 that were general managers, golf pros, someone outside of the actual golf course management. So that leaves us with about 850 that were either superintendents or assistant superintendents, or some kind of lead technician like an irrigation technician or something along that

nature... we probably had 20 or 30 students that I would include in that first group of 100.

This example shows that the “community of practice” that comes together at a conference is often representative of diverse interests, albeit with a common focus (in this case, the turf grass or golf course industry). To participate in a community of practice, Wenger (1998) states that individuals must have “enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members” (p. 101), so students and technicians who might be aspiring to superintendent roles would be perceived as potentially valuable members. In addition, the “experts” – professors from universities in related areas of research, may be invited in, and in some instance, become longer standing members of the community, in the same way as sales/industry representatives are also seen as contributing participants.

Organizing the Event

The organizations that were studied use a variety of frameworks to organize conference events. Even though each of these areas involves a level of professional education, the participation of volunteers was key to ensuring success. In many ways, the organizational team that designs and oversees the development of a conference, may reflect a smaller version of a “community of practice”. This may be seen in the case of Malice Domestic, a mystery conference, where:

It's an entirely volunteer board. We have a couple of people we pay, but the board members are made up of in-board members and committee chairs to make a total of thirteen people. We meet once a month in the hotel and later this month we'll meet for our post-con to talk about the things that worked at the convention and the things that didn't. Even though we've been doing this for twenty-five years and I've been doing it for fifteen, there are still things to learn... We have seven voting members and six non-voting members and it's an enormous amount of work. You have to be willing to dedicate the time.

At one academic conference where a number of paid staff were involved, one of the organizers pointed out the importance of getting them to feel involved:

Here the office staff assigned to the conference are part of the organizing committee to begin with, so they get quite excited about it. That's what I mean by support. It is very important that there be an ethos that says this is really fun and important, and most importantly we'll do a really great job. It's about doing better than the last conference so they really get into that.

For the golf course superintendents, while there is a paid executive director and paid staff, the role of the volunteer board is still significant for providing input and direction for the events.

Successful conference planning seems to involve being in touch with the types of activities and interests that will

appeal to the broader constituency. One organizer summed it up: “It means having a lot of activities to do, a lot of networking that happens between the sessions, but it also means creating high quality formal sessions.”

Darlene Clover, who organized an academic adult education conference reflected on program decisions for an opening panel session:

What we were conscious of doing was bringing in community activists...some of them happened to be students because students are very much community people. I was very aware of trying to create some sense of place in terms of where you are at this moment, at this time. The other thing that was very important to me was the Aboriginal [culture so] the talk was bookended with two Aboriginal leaders, an Aboriginal adult educator in an institution and an extremely articulate activist. I wanted people to really understand and get a taste of the Aboriginal essence of this province because there's so much unceded territory here, so many treaties have not been signed and this [British Columbia] is a very young province in terms of settlers.

Other coordinators who were involved in organizing conferences that moved locations also mentioned that the geographical and cultural sense of place was frequently important in terms of what activities and content were included as part of the conference.

Conferences evolve over time, as they build up a “shared repertoire” of knowledge and experiences. Returning to the mystery conference example, the coordinator, Verena Rose explained that:

We keep adding more things because people want more of this or that... an example is called You've Got Fan Mail. It's an all honoree panel... I ask them to talk about their most interesting piece of fan mail or email they've received now that we're in the electronic age... We've had some uproarious conversations. The first year I did this event, Peter Lovesey was on the panel and he brought a whole series of wonderful, quirky fan mail that he's received...It's a fun time for people to get together and see the authors interacting, and it's a nice jump-off for the convention.

She notes the importance of making this a stand-alone event, so that all the attendees may come together. Even though readers participate in the mystery community in a different way than writers or editors do, this initial presentation, done in a conversational manner with its inherent opportunities to create shared laughter amongst all attendees, provides an excellent opportunity to help engage participants in a joint “community of practice”.

Similarly, one conference organizer discussed the importance of planning social events at conferences to provide informal learning opportunities, noting:

We promote these events as networking opportunities... as a chance to have a conversation with two or three colleagues about a situation you might be dealing with. Often times, someone in that group has dealt with the same problem and they are willing to talk about what they did and the result of that. Others are quite willing to say, I never had that situation, but this is what I would do. That's often resulting from the relaxed environment and...there's food and beverage available...that's a very valuable exchange.

An academic conference organizer echoed similar thoughts about social events: "I think they're important ways for people to connect in an informal way on their research, and also to connect personally as well, which you may not do in a classroom during a talk."

New Technologies

As a part of this study we were curious as to whether our "key informants" thought that conferences would eventually become obsolete, or at least change radically in form because of advances in technologies. One participant said:

Five years ago I was expecting us to all be having lots of opportunities for virtual participation at a distance using Wikis and video conferences. I think we've all experimented with that and had varying degrees of success to the point where we say, Let's just go back to face-to-face. So the idea of integrating technology into the actual sharing of content has been restricted to Twitter which we use a fair bit during the conference.

Another organizer reflected:

I don't know that technology itself has changed the nature of the conference. It's certainly made the running of it easier in terms of the ability to get in touch with people via email...everything happens a little bit quicker and more efficiently

New social media has created different opportunities for interactions between participants, and the challenges of thinking through how to address this was summarized by one organizer:

for social media we basically had the guidelines down to: Do not be a total, utter asshole. Which then assumes that you might want to be a total, utter asshole left up to your own devices, which I felt was quite authoritarian so we dumped them [rules for participation] and put some gentle guidance on the website instead.

Most participants did not think that conferences would ever be totally phased out, but one organizer reflected the ambivalence around conference learning with new technologies:

The virtual makes it more convenient that way, but I don't know if you can get the same level of interaction. We have twenty concurrent sessions going on at one time. You can't do that

virtually. Well, I guess you could maybe, but... when I see "virtual" conference, I think of one talk at a time. It's doable, but I don't think it will have the same feel to it. On the other hand...it's a huge cost associated with having conferences. With cutbacks at the moment, people are really watching their dollars.

In a neoliberal environment where everything has to be justified according to the perceived demands of the marketplace, the value of face-to-face interaction in lifelong learning contexts such as conferences may be devalued. If there is a belief that the same information can be "delivered" via technologies, there may be less support for conferences regardless of the impact that they may have in sustaining collegial communities of practice.

Implications for Adult Education

Given the evolution of new technologies, it may be easy to dismiss the importance of learning through events such as conferences. This research suggests that it may be worthwhile, however, to explore further the opportunities for face-to-face learning events. While conferences occur over a condensed period of time, they often serve to strengthen relationships that may lead to long term benefits in strengthening communities of practice.

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