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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the focus on formal training and proposes a new way of incorporating communities of practice into professional development. It describes formal and informal learning found in organizations and discusses the implications of using communities of practice to foster professional development. Data collection involved observations in one public defender's office between October 1998 and March 1999, examining the daily work practices of attorneys, shadowing two attorneys during their work days, sitting in on two jury trials, visiting the local jail, and attending various social gatherings. Interviews related to learning experiences in this community were conducted with seven attorneys at the beginning and end of the fieldwork. The first interviews were relatively general, and the second interviews focused on specific incidents occurring during the observations. Newsletters and a Web site provided by the public defender council were also reviewed. Data analysis indicated that public defenders engaged in informal learning through conversations with colleagues, reflection, and practice. Formal learning opportunities mainly involved required continuing legal education (CLE). Most of the attorneys were positive about the CLE, and they generally valued both formal and informal learning. (Contains 25 references.) (SM)

**Formal and Informal Learning: Incorporating Communities of Practice into  
Professional Development**

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### **Abstract**

The field of professional training has a long tradition of supporting learning and performance through formal training. This paper raises questions about the focus on formal learning and proposes a new way of incorporating communities of practice into professional development. Communities of practice are informal networks that support a group of practitioners in developing a shared meaning and engaging in knowledge building among the members. The purposes of this paper are to describe informal and formal learning found in organizations and to discuss the implications of informal and formal learning in communities of practice for general professional development.

### **Introduction**

The field of professional training has a long tradition of supporting learning and performance through formal training. Recently, Brown & Duguid (1996) raised criticisms against traditional training and instruction because training courses occur outside the context of daily practices. They emphasized the importance of informal learning that occurs in workplaces by using the concept of “communities of practice” developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). Because the use of the term communities of practice is not consistent among different scholars, the following definition is used in this paper: “Communities of practice are informal networks that support professional practitioners to develop a shared meaning and engage in knowledge building among the members” (Hara, 2000, p. 11). This definition is based on the Wenger's four traits to define communities of practice as a social fabric of learning: negotiating meaning; preserving and creating knowledge; spreading information; and being a home for identities (Wenger, 1998).

Apparently, there is a need for a significant shift from traditional training to designing effective learning environments (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Brown & Duguid, 2000; Schwen, Kalman, Hara, & Kisling, 1998). To help foster such designs, this paper offers empirical studies of the comparison between formal and informal learning. Furthermore, the paper discusses the practical implications of using communities of practice as a milieu of fostering both formal and informal learning.

## **Methods**

### **Data collection:**

The selection of the research sites was based on certain criteria (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). In fact, the research site was chosen based on the five attributes that derived from the definition of a community of practice: (1) a group of practitioners; (2) the development of a shared meaning; (3) informal networks; (4) supportive culture-trust; and (5) engagement in knowledge building. By using initial observations and interviews, I identified a community of practice at a public defender's office.

**Observations.** I conducted observations in the public defender's office in Square County between October 1998 and March 1999. The fieldwork<sup>1</sup> included observing the daily work practices of public defenders, shadowing two attorneys during their workdays, sitting in on two jury trials, making four visits to the local jail, and attending various social gatherings such as parties. Also, I chose to observe the two jury trials because trials are one of the major events in which attorneys strongly support each other and in which learning and reflection frequently occur. In addition to these planned observations,

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<sup>1</sup> See Hara (2000) for a complete study.

there were times when the attorneys invited me to follow them, to go visit the jail with them or to go to a party. Since this study was an emergent design (Schwandt, 1997), most of these times, I decided to observe these informal occasions. The informal observations outside the office gave me an insight into the culture of the office and the relationships among the attorneys.

During the first two weeks of observing this office, I was a rather passive participant observer. However, after two weeks, I asked the manager of the office, Paul Linton,<sup>2</sup> if I could help with some work because all of the employees, including the secretaries, seemed very busy, and also if I could participate in some work practices, I could learn more about the nature of the work. Therefore, I was more of a participant-observer after Paul allowed me to do some office work.

**Interviews.** Interviews related to learning experiences in this community were conducted individually during office hours. Interviews were conducted twice with seven attorneys at the beginning and end of the fieldwork, once with an investigator in the public defender's office, and once with a prosecutor at the end of the fieldwork. All interviews were semi-structured, which allowed for other questions, and lasted between a half hour and an hour. The first interviews were conducted in order to determine a research site based on the criteria I stated earlier. Therefore, the questions were rather general compared to the second interviews. The questions during the second interviews concerned more specific incidences during my observation. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. In addition, I had informal conversations with these attorneys,

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<sup>2</sup> All the informants' names are pseudonyms.

a work-study student, an intern, and secretaries as well as judges, prosecutors, and clients throughout the fieldwork.

**Document review.** I reviewed newsletters and a web site provided by the public defender council that offers services related to public defender's professional development. A person from the public defender council gave me a report on lawyer competence and an outline of the condensed index of attorneys' improper behaviors. I obtained a copy of the judge's final instructions to the jury during my observation of a trial.

### **Data analysis:**

Three different kinds of data (observation, interview, and document review) were analyzed simultaneously while the data were collected. In addition, I coded all the written text (observation notes, researcher's reflection logs, interview transcriptions, and documents obtained) after conducting the fieldwork. Through the coding process, I confirmed the themes I noted during the fieldwork and found additional themes. The analysis was triangulated in terms of methodologies, people, and time (Silverman, 1996; Stake, 1995). Furthermore, each interview transcript, observation vignette, and interpretation was validated by informants.

Multiple perspectives allow people to see situations differently. Therefore, case studies need to provide multiple perspectives and let readers judge and construct their reality (Prus, 1996; Stake, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Wolcott, 1990). In this study, congruence as well as inconsistency was cautiously examined in order to present multiple perspectives.

## **Community of Practice in the Square County Public Defender's Office**

The proceeding sections describe the site and provide narratives of the public defender's office in Square County in terms of the attorneys' work practices and formal and informal learning experiences. In the second section, I highlight two trials and show how the public defenders engage in informal learning through conversations with colleagues, reflection, and practice. Finally, I discuss how formal and informal learning supplement each other within this community of practice.

### **Site Description**

The Public Defender's Office where I conducted the fieldwork is located in a small Midwest town, in Square County. The office has seven attorneys who deal with criminal cases, five men and two women. All have been working for this office for at least six years and know each other fairly well. In addition to the attorneys, an office manager, two secretaries, two law clerks (law students), and a college student work in this office. Since the office space is small, communication among the seven attorneys occurs frequently, but ad hoc. They stay in touch with what their colleagues are doing by "keeping an ear open" (personal communication). They used to have regular meetings, but due to scheduling difficulties, they had not held a meeting for about 6 months by the time I started the fieldwork there. Part of the problem with scheduling comes from their overwhelming caseloads. Previously, the courts were closed on Fridays, but because of high demand, they are now open on Fridays as well. Each attorney has approximately 140 to 150 active cases.

The casework is equally distributed. Six attorneys take roughly 15% of the cases each and the seventh, the head of the public defender's office, takes the remaining 10%

plus administrative responsibilities. Of course, there are some exceptions. For example, if someone has a big murder case, or a relatively heavy case, then that person is not likely to be assigned new cases while working on such a special case. The public defender's office is located in the Justice Building in the downtown area. The building contains seven courtrooms,<sup>3</sup> the probation office, the prosecutor's office, judges' offices, and the public defender's office. In addition, there is a jail above the fourth floor.

It is usually very easy to distinguish between clients and attorneys because their dress codes are quite different. Attorneys always wear suits, ties, or other formal clothing, whereas most of their clients wear casual clothes such as jeans and T-shirts and look worried. Only a few clients dress formally. Many clients are teenagers. There are about ten chairs in the waiting room, and sometimes they are all taken. However, sometimes, there are not many people waiting. The secretary in the front office has to take care of phone calls as well as deal with clients face-to-face. The secretary attends to as many as 15 people at a time. The office usually seems very busy. In the back office is a main area, six-and-a-half individual attorneys' offices, and a library. The seventh attorney does not have a separate office. Instead, he has a desk in an open space, surrounded by file cabinets.

The location of the public defender's office gives attorneys in the office proximity to everything they need: clients, judges, probation offices, prosecutor's office, and courts. However, their office is relatively small compared to the probation office and the

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<sup>3</sup> One of the courtrooms is so small that when I asked an attorney how many courtrooms were in the building, he said, "7, or 6 and a half."



prosecutor's office. This disparity indicates the power struggles within the justice building.

### **Two Public Defender's Trials**

According to the interviews, the attorneys are particularly helpful to each other when someone is defending a client on trial. I had the opportunity to observe two trials during my fieldwork. Both Alisha Book and Nick Moore are experienced attorneys. For both cases, I was in the office the day before trial and sat in court during the trials. Prior to the trials that I observed, Sally, who had joined the office right out of a law school six years ago, described how attorneys in the office helped each other, especially when somebody was in a trial.

When someone has a trial, everyone tends to get involved. So, like we just finished Alisha's case, just finished a three-day rape trial that ended up with a misdemeanor battery plea, basically after going through the three days of trial. But everybody gets that sort of energizing time for the whole office. Everybody gets involved, if she needs help with something in the middle of the trial, if something comes up, everybody just sort of rallies. So, in that sense, those of the times we worked the closest together are when someone is in a trial. We try to help each other out. (personal communication, November 5, 1998).

Sally summarized what happened during the trial. Her comment supports the following observations: a trial encourages attorneys in this office to collaborate with each other although their work is highly individualized.

Defending a client on trial is an extremely arduous task. It requires concentration, strategy, toughness under pressure, and sometimes luck. Sally described a "trial mode":

There is a T-shirt that I have seen. That has a cat with its claws out like this, claws trying to hold on. All you see is these scratch marks down the wood, and the top says, trial mode. And that's how you get. You just have to. Just that your adrenaline starts pumping and until you've had the experience, you'd think that you would have a heart attack and die. Because you get so, it starts about a week before the trial, and your heart is, you can feel it pumping faster and you can feel your adrenaline going, and it just continues right through the trial until the end of

the closing arguments, and then your whole body sort of zzzz [noise]. But it's just a, it's a physiological thing.

Sally's comment illustrates what it is like to be in a trial. I imagine that the "trial mode" helps them get through the trial and its physical and mental challenges. Even as an observer shadowing the two attorneys, these trials were compelling vicarious experiences. Sally confirmed my thoughts: "Yes, very, it's a lot of work, when you think about it. It's like, it never leaves your mind. You dream about it" (personal communication, March 10, 1999).

Mary, a prosecutor, also expressed her perception of being in a trial when I told her that Alisha looked different in the trial:

She is, and we probably all are to a certain degree. And some of it's probably intentional, that you're trying to make sure that you're very careful about the way you speak, and very professional and all that. But some of it's also unintentional, because I'm sure my emotions are different when I'm in trial and that may make me react differently. Like I'm more hyped up and excited when I'm in trial than on a daily basis (personal communication, March 15, 1999).

Both Sally and Mary agreed that being in trials is an energizing experience. Jason Kelly, who has worked for about 9 years as an attorney in this office, actually compared it to an athletic contest: Before going onto the field, your energy level is very high, and once you get in the field, you do the best you can. To go through this trial process would have been hard without support from other attorneys. The public defender's office can provide a very supportive environment.

There are three emerging themes in this section: the attorneys' collective efforts to do their best for their clients, their dedication to their clients, and their constant reflection on their performance. I found it remarkable that the attorneys in this office helped and supported to their colleagues when they had to go to trial. Alisha described

her experiences of obtaining and offering help in this office: “Every time we go to trial, if anybody needs something, we all drop everything to help them out” (personal communication, November 17, 1998). Both Alisha and Nick's trials were difficult cases because the prosecutors had more evidence than they did and perhaps received more support from the jurors who were the representatives of the society. However, both attorneys did their best work on their clients' behalf. Unfortunately, the results of both cases were losses. This is a burden that the attorneys in this office have as public defenders. Although they may provide an excellent defense, they still may lose. Many factors influence the results of trials, and an attorney's performance is just one of them. Most of the cases that public defenders have do not seem easy to defend. Indeed, they told me that many of their clients have long criminal histories and some had even confessed before going to trial.

The underlying philosophy of doing the best job for the clients is based on the public defenders' belief that everybody, including the indigent, has to have the right to be protected by the constitution. Throughout the observations, I was struck by the attorneys' dedication to their clients. For example, the attorneys referred to the defendants as “clients.” That was surprising to me because it showed respect for them whereas the prosecutors called the same people “defendants.” The attorneys seemed to understand that their clients did not have anyone else to rely on and that the public defenders were the last people who could help them. In effect, calling a defendant “a client” sounds too formal sometimes. I noticed that when the attorneys were talking to each other, they referred to their clients as “my guy.” This expression indicates a type of affection for

their clients in addition to the informality of the conversations among the public defenders.

During my observations of Alisha and Nick's cases, I noticed that the attorneys were constantly reflecting on their practices. Paul, the manager of the office, described this kind of reflection as an attorney:

... obviously if you lose a case, you always wish you had done something different. That's one of the things you think about it, and you tried to tell other attorneys, you know, "Is there anything you would've done differently?" If you think about it and say, "No, I might have done this, but I'm not sure it would have been any better." Then, I think you don't need to beat yourself to death, because you don't know. It's one of the things like, "Do I put a client on the stage to testify?" If you don't, you think, "Oh, I lost because he didn't tell a story." If you do, you think, "He was such a terrible witness, why did I ever put him up there?" But I don't know if, [that makes any difference]. (personal communication, March 9, 1999).

In both trials, Alisha and Nick were constantly thinking about whether they should have had their clients testify. Nick later explained to me that the reason he did not put his client on the witness stand was because if the prosecutor had asked the client whether the client had sold drugs, he would have had to say "yes." I told him that that was a good decision because I had observed Alisha's case in which her client had testified, perjured himself, and that had eventually hurt her defense.

In terms of communication patterns, Alisha had the tendency to talk with other attorneys. She preferred to talk to other attorneys even during the trial whereas Nick preferred to be by himself. I speculate that it is a personal style because Alisha is an outgoing person and Nick is more reserved. Also, their styles in the trials were quite different. Sally agreed that "You've got different styles. Every one of us is very different" (personal communication, March 10, 1999). Alisha tended to show her emotions during the trial and be slightly aggressive whereas Nick looked very clam.

Although the frequency and context of their conversations with the others was different, both discussed their cases with other attorneys.

Tom Ashton, another attorney in the office who used to work as a prosecutor, mentioned that reflection was a part of their routine to practice law. When I asked him whether he reflected on his own performance, he said:

Well, constantly, to me, it's a constant process. You always think about the last issue you had in front of a judge or a prosecutor. What can you do better or what can I try this time that I didn't try last time, or something like that. It's not an organized fashion or it's not like a meditation session or something where I say, "every day at 7:30 in the morning, I'm going to reflect for an hour." It's more a piecemeal, it's much more at night thinking about things as anything else, driving in a car, or. I always think about things, I don't obsess about things as much as I used to. I think there's a difference between reflection and obsession, but I think it's always, just always constantly in your head, how you can do better or easier for different results. (personal communication, March 12, 1999).

Sally also remarked on her experience of reflecting back on her performance:

You just think it back over, and often it comes up specifically with trials because you are always rethinking your strategies. But you just, as you read cases, you think, Oh gee, you know, I could have argued this, or I could have argued that, or I should have tried to keep that statement out, or why didn't I think of this. So, you can't read, you can't pick up a legal book with cases in it and read a case without having it remind you of something you did or didn't do. So it's a constant, you know, the more experience you have, it's a constant re-evaluation of everything you have done, which is good (personal communication, March 10, 1999).

Tom and Sally agreed that those reflections are constant and personal, but I occasionally observed that they share the reflections with their colleagues. When I asked Tom whether he shared his reflection with other attorneys, he replied that he shared a part of it anecdotally, but most of the time, it is a personal reflection.

As is described in the interview excerpts, reflection is an important part of attorneys' work practices. Although Tom and Sally reported different styles of their own

reflection, the attorneys in this office learn from their experience and sometimes share the reflection and experience with other attorneys. Schön (1983) calls it “reflecting-in-practice” (p. 59). Although these attorneys may not explicitly share their personal reflection as indicated in Tom's comment, their reflections are in effect embedded in the stories they tell each other.

### **Formal and Informal Learning Opportunities**

In order to practice law in this state, all attorneys are required to take continuing legal education (CLE) credits. They are mandated to take at least six hours per year and have to accrue at least 36 hours in a three-year period. In addition, at least 3 of the 36 hours must be in ethics. Most of the attorneys think that this CLE provides a good learning opportunity.

The majority of the attorneys have positive views about CLE. For example, when I asked Sally whether she thought that CLE was a good learning opportunity, she affirmed:

Oh, yes, very much. It's hard to stay not only current, but on top of things in this profession because we have so many demands for us every single day by our clients, and by the courts. And so it's a way that just step back and sort of refresh yourself and get excited about something again, which is really good for us (personal communication, November 5, 1998).

Sally indicated that CLE is a useful endeavor to re-orient herself because she can get away from her busy life in the office in addition to gaining up-dated knowledge. Unlike Sally, Nick does not think CLE is as valuable:

Everybody you talk to might give you an idea—approach to a case or a tactic or technique. And that's what you might get out of a seminar, but is it worth driving there, paying money because it's a seminar, leaving at 7 in the morning and getting back at 6 at night, and sitting around basically for 8 hours a day listening to people who think they know more than you do in order to pick up a couple of tactics? I don't think so (personal communication, November 10, 1998).

Nick's criticisms about CLE might be because of his cynical attitude. In addition, he seemed not to think that the given information would be so precious because it is still somebody else's opinion, not his. He appeared to believe that he needed to acquire information and improve his performance by himself. The other attorneys' views of CLE were mixed, yet mainly positive.

Compared to the formal learning opportunities, all the attorneys mentioned that informal learning opportunities could not be overlooked. Regarding informal learning in daily practices, Tom explained that:

We learn all the time. You go into court, and you wait for your hearings, and you watch other lawyers do their hearings before you. If there is a trial going on, and you have a free time, you will try to go down and watch part of the trial to see what goes on. So, yeah, there are a lot of informal opportunities.

According to Tom, observation is a great learning process. I asked Tom how I could find out about these informal opportunities that he described. He explained:

You go down to court, and while you are waiting for your hearing, you see other lawyers, you see them talk to prosecutors, how do they talk to prosecutors? See them how they interact with the judge, you see them how, where they stand, or they don't, where they sit, all that stuff. So, it's sort of forced to [learn]. And after that you learned to read the schedule, you sort of see, "OK, there is a jury trial down in room 317 that looks interesting and has good lawyers trying the case." "Oh, I've heard so and so is a good lawyer," so I go down and watch that.

Tom's explanation illustrates how younger or even very experienced attorneys learn through their work practices. I further asked how he knew of the attorneys' reputations as he mentioned "good lawyers." He explained to me:

Basically, you have to take some initiative in sort of going around to other lawyers in the office and kind of saying, asking questions like, "What is this mean?" or asking interpretations or asking some of those initial questions. It's basically, you have to sort of be self-motivated to start the process to be able to

figure out the information. If you are not self-motivated, you are in trouble here, in this office. You are in big trouble.

This self-motivation issue was also described earlier in the section of criteria for success. Being self-motivated is a key factor in being a public defender. I asked him whether self-motivation is a common factor to lawyers or specific to this office. He was not certain, but alluded to the idea that self-motivation is necessary for trial attorneys, both public defenders and prosecutors. In a similar vein, Mary, a prosecutor who went to trial against Alisha, explained that her informal learning experience was gained by watching other attorneys:

You're definitely learning from each other, and you're definitely learning from the defense. Generally, if I have got a jury trial coming up with a specific defense attorney that I haven't tried a case against before and somebody else is going to try a case against him, I'll go up and watch that person's style, just to see if I can pick up on things that they do. Definitely. That's a great learning experience, both to watch, I love to watch other attorneys practice. Because, you learn a lot that way (personal communication, March 15, 1999).

Mary's comments affirmed that the informal learning opportunities are common to both public defenders and prosecutors. Mary commented that she learned through the experience of going to trial with Alisha:

I think of it [trial] is, it's not a game, by any means, but I could liken it to a sporting event. In that, when you do sports and you play a competitor that's really good, sometimes that makes you better. And then if you get better, they get better. It's kind of like that.

I: As an analogy. Yeah, I think that makes sense.

M: That's definitely true, you know, that's part of the reason I really like to try cases with Alisha, because Alisha is really good. She's a good one to learn from (personal communication, March 15, 1999).

Hence, Mary addresses the importance of learning by practice. She was referring to the fact that Alisha's high performance would improve her own practice, and that hopefully



both would improve their performance. This situation, in fact, is exactly like an athletic contest. In this sense, her analogy of playing sports is appropriate.

Tom believes that the learning process is continuing throughout his professional life:

... it's a continuous process. I mean, with each case you can handle, you get more mastery. You get more experience, you get better. But, I still don't think I do everything 100% right for every case. I still think I have things to learn, and things that I need to work on and, things that I need to be better at (personal communication, November 5, 1998).

Again, along with self-motivation, "reflection-in-action" is an important factor in improving performance. Tom indicated that he was always looking for something to improve. Sally also suggested the best way to be a better attorney is to "ask questions" (personal communication, November 5, 1998). Both Tom and Sally believe that asking questions is very important. It was also implied that formal and informal learning opportunities supplement each other, which will be delineated in detail in the next section.

### **Practical Knowledge vs. Book Knowledge**

All the office attorneys plus a prosecutor expressed the difference between "book knowledge" that they gained in law school and seminars through formal learning and "practical knowledge" that they could actually use in their practice. They appeared to stress the importance of "practical knowledge" more than "book knowledge," but both kinds of knowledge are necessary to practice law well. In this section, I will provide examples of each kind of knowledge and describe the process of converting "book knowledge" to "practical knowledge." The process of conversion starts when an attorney begins to practice. Paul, the manager of the office, mentioned that a new lawyer,

somebody who is just out of law school, does have “book knowledge,” but they have to transfer this general knowledge to contextualized “practical knowledge.” For example, he listed the first things that a new attorney has to know, such as judges’ attitudes toward different crimes:

one judge might really dislike a burglary, for example, and another judge might be real hard on rapes, another judge might be really favorable of treatment for alcohol problems, or another one would like the treatment of all to be able to send them to jail or something (personal communication, November 5, 1998).

The knowledge described here about judges was contextualized because Paul was talking about specific judges in specific courts. This type of knowledge can be explicitly exchanged among attorneys. I frequently observed that the attorneys in the office talked about different judges among themselves. They had to know the behavior, philosophy, and attitudes of seven judges in seven different courts. In addition, Tom described another kind of knowledge as “so much of what we do is instinctual.” He continued:

You have to know, for example, when to approach a judge, or when to approach a prosecutor with a certain problem or a certain circumstance. Or how to approach a judge; do I take a humorous approach, do I crack a joke before I walk up there, or do I take a serious approach? That's just intuitive. That comes from experience. You can't teach that to somebody. I can't tell you, take it to court and say, “Now, see the judge's eye brows twitching, that means.” You know? I can't do that. It doesn't work that way (personal communication, November 5, 1998).

Therefore, an attorney has to develop his or her own tacit understanding of the judges because it is not something that the attorney explicitly tells other attorneys. The knowledge is embedded in individuals and is based in their styles.

In order to gain tacit knowledge, trial attorneys observe other trial attorneys. When the prosecutor told me that she learned informally by watching other attorneys' practices, I asked her the difference between watching trials and taking seminars. She

stated that seminars provide academic knowledge whereas watching people in trial provide practical knowledge:

Sometimes you learn a rule of law or the way you're supposed to do something in a seminar, but it doesn't really click mentally and make sense to you in a way that's tangible, until you see somebody do it. . . . Let's say you go to a seminar on how to admit DNA evidence. And then you happen to get to observe a trial where someone is admitting DNA evidence, and you can sit there and put together all the academic things you've learned with, even just simple things like how you move around the courtroom, when you go up to the court reporter and have her put a sticker on something. When you show something to the judge, and when you show it to the defense counsel, and when you show it to the witness and how you do all those things, sometimes it's nice to actually watch someone do it before you have to do it. (personal communication, March 15, 1999).

In this comment, the prosecutor differentiated practical knowledge from academic knowledge, which I call "book knowledge." Book knowledge is technical and factual knowledge that is usually obtained in classrooms and seminars, whereas practical knowledge is the knowledge that is obtained through daily practice. As in the case of DNA evidence, the process of converting academic knowledge to practical knowledge comes from observing other attorneys' performance and matching their behavior with the concepts.

Contrast that to the prosecutor, who emphasized learning through observation, Alisha emphasized learning by practicing. She summarized the process of converting what she called "fundamental things" to practical knowledge as "practice makes perfect in any kind of job" and described the process in detail:

When you get out of law school, they teach you a lot of basics about legal issues. They don't teach you how to get up in front of a judge and say the right things, how to move around in a courtroom, how to pick a jury, how to do opening statements. I mean, you know, most of what you do in the beginning is you spend a lot of time writing everything out, so you know what to say, instead of just going in there and being able to say it, because you've done it a thousand times. Yeah, when I first started practicing in trials, I wrote most everything out so that I wouldn't forget anything, and I would remember everything I needed to do. And

I still spend a lot of time writing, but I don't do it to nearly the extent that I did. Now I can pick a jury with my eyes closed for the most part, because I've done it so many times. But I think it's probably still the most important part of the trial, and I think that, I would like to think that I'm only going to get better at it (personal communication, March 11, 1999).

Alisha explained that at the start of her career she had had to write down exactly what she would say. As she had been practicing, she internalized the process and now she could select a jury "with my eyes closed for the most part." Therefore, there is a stage when the attorneys convert book knowledge to practical knowledge. This process of converting book knowledge to practical knowledge can be done internally or collectively through dialogue between two or more attorneys.

Although the attorneys illustrated the individual conversion process, the process can take place collectively through peer interactions. Jason and Richard Wilson, who has been practicing law for more than twenty years, both described how Richard applied his learning from a seminar to practice, or how he converted "book knowledge" to "practical knowledge." Richard recalled his experience of applying book knowledge for a trial:

I remember a rape trial I had, which was a major trial, A felonies. I think this was a close call and I never found my client guilty. And it was looking at 120 some years in jail. And it came down to the very end. And I had this case completely planned out. This was one of the cases I had done an absolute detailed job getting ready for it. I had everything lined up for it. Every question I had, I read. It was some people said you never do. This one book I read suggested I should do it this way. I have written down, I know exactly every question I asked. I could refer to a page and a line number of where I was going to find answers of those. So I knew the detail of every single question. And I supposedly, when I asked the prosecutor, he said I cross-examined for six hours, I don't know if that's true, if it had taken that long, but it was a long cross-examination (personal communication, March 5, 1999).

Richard remembered his case precisely because this is one of the cases he won by using a new technique. He described how he used the technique that he learned from a book and applied it for to trial. However, he also acknowledged Jason's assistance:

It came down to the end where a decision was going to be based on whether my client wanted to testify and how I was going to do it. I remember going out of the courtroom and talking to Jason about this. He suggested the different alternative that I had thought before and that was a lunch break. So I struggled with that and struggled with that. And I finally took Jason's suggestion, gave it that way, and it worked out well (personal communication, March 5, 1999).

Richard analyzed his victory as being due to not only the cross-examination technique he had used, but also because of Jason's advice during the trial. Therefore, the case involved the attorneys' collective efforts to help the person on trial.

Jason observed how Richard converted book knowledge that he had gained in a seminar to practical knowledge in the trial, and further commented: ". . . it's the best example that I know for continuing, trying to get better because he worked so hard" (personal communication, March 9, 1999).

Richard told me that he worked on the case preparation for four months. When he finally heard the verdict, Richard found that the jury could not reach a verdict on any of the charges, so it was declared "hung." As a result, he and the prosecutor eventually negotiated a plea to a D felony. During the trial, the conversion of book knowledge to practical knowledge was done successfully.

From these interviews, it appeared that book knowledge is easy to share whereas practical knowledge is harder to share because the former is explicit, while the latter can be either tacit or explicit. There are two kinds in practical knowledge. For example, to gain understanding of judges' preferences of crimes is rather explicit, but to understand how to approach certain judges is tacit. Schön (1983) notes that "the workaday life of the professional depends on tacit knowing-in-action" (p. 49). However, it does not mean that book knowledge is not important. Richard marked the importance of theory within book knowledge:

What you are learning really is a method of thought, a method of approach, of analysis, on what other people have thought. So I think that is very critical because everything we do, that's related to it. We have to know the thinking. We have to know the process. We have to know the process of research. We have to know the theories behind the process in order to come up with good defenses sometimes. Now that doesn't apply all the time, but it does apply for us (personal communication, March 5, 1999).

According to Richard, both book knowledge and practical knowledge are equally important in order to practice law. In fact, he emphasized theory (book knowledge) more than the other. However, more importantly, the attorneys have to develop a method to bridge these two kinds of knowledge. Either book knowledge alone or practical knowledge alone would be less useful than the knowledge combined. Richard's case illustrated how he had transferred book knowledge into practical knowledge and how other attorneys could benefit from observing such a processes of conversion in this community of practice. This is an example of how a community of practice can facilitate blending formal and informal learning.

### **Conclusion: Educational Importance of the Work**

The informal learning described here is not new. In fact, Becker (1960; 1972), Wenger (1990), and others have conducted studies of informal learning and concluded that informal learning is sometimes more effective than formal learning in classrooms. However, I assert that formal and informal learning are complimentary for professional development. The public defenders I studied value both kinds of learning.

The connection between formal and informal learning might not have gained much attention in the past because previous studies of communities of practice examined technical workers, such as copy machine technicians (Orr, 1990; 1996) and claim processors (Wenger, 1990). On the other hand, public defenders constantly need to

update their knowledge because criminal law is changing rapidly. This is also true for other highly specialized professionals. Although this study is specifically about public defenders, the concept could be expanded to other professionals, such as doctors, engineers, researchers, and teachers. They also need to combine formal and informal learning.

Furthermore, in order to leverage formal and informal learning, a community of practice could be a tool to bridge the two learning opportunities. A community of practice is not just a place for information exchange, but a scaffolding for converting book knowledge gained from formal learning to practical knowledge through informal learning, as I described with Richard's case. The use of communities of practice can be applicable to other professionals, as many corporations are interested in applying communities of practice to their knowledge management strategies (Wenger, 2000).

For example, doctors who are isolated in rural areas could exchange information and learn from each other via online conferencing and develop a community of practice among themselves. There are some research projects that attempt to create this kind of community among AIDS researchers (Collaboratory for Research on Electronic Work, 2000) and space scientists (Olson, Atkins, Clauer, Finholt, Jahanian, Killeen, Prakash, & Weymouth, 1998) by using technologies. However, it is important to examine the phenomena before starting the application of building communities of practice, because there is little empirical evidence of what actually happens within those communities. I hope that this paper will contribute to our understanding of how communities of practice can be used as a tool for professional development.

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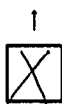
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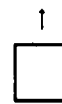
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