Development of Communities of Practice in School Library Education

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To properly prepare pre-service school librarians, school library educators in online courses must provide opportunities for collaborative engagement. This collaborative education should also recognize the pedagogical benefit of the organic formation of communities of practice that develop within areas outside of curriculum content. This examination of Communities of Practice seeks to understand the influence a change in the learning context of today's digital courses has on these communities of practice for School Librarians. Findings address how different course structures promote a sense of belonging, organized along Wenger's (1998) three modes of belonging: Engagement, Alignment, and Imagination. How these modes of belonging facilitate the development of a community of practice among students in an online, introductory school library course is also explored. The role of LIS educators in developing collaborative practices in their students is discussed, especially for students studying in an online environment.

Keywords: collaboration, community of practice, distance learning, online learning, third space, school librarians, LIS education

Introduction

School librarians must collaborate with members of their learning community in order to fulfill their roles as school librarians. The national standards for school librarians have emphasized this responsibility. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs (2009), also emphasizes this goal through the role of the Instructional Partner. Although collaboration is part of the school librarian's responsibility, collaborating with other educators is not always easy to accomplish. Learning to collaborate and work well with others is not something that always comes naturally in the educational field because teaching can be a very individual and practitioners

work in isolated situations. It is imperative that school library educators ensure that their students understand how to collaborate and experience the process of developing collaborative practices during their coursework and training.

Distance education can be a challenging context for offering students opportunities to collaborate. With coursework in school library programs increasingly migrating to online platforms and continued high numbers of non-traditional students seeking certification as school librarians (Hawkinson Melkun, 2012), incorporating opportunities to learn how to collaborate during school library preparation programs is essential. One means of establishing this collaborative network is through the creation of a Community of Practice. For pre-service school librarians, collaboration may

be practiced and mirrored through the development of a community of practice in an online course. Experiencing a community of practice during coursework assists emerging school librarians with implementing this collaborative network in their future school library positions. It also provides them with the foundation they need to establish a collaborative culture with the members of their learning community. This paper describes research conducted in a pre-service online class where students were presented with the opportunity to experience collaborative environments through the development of a community of learners, designed to prepare them for their future roles as school librarians.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is multifaceted. It is based on Wenger's Community of Practice (1998), Dresang's Radical Change theory (1999), and Giddens' Structuration Theory (1984). A previous study of community development in this pre-service school library program, conducted by Marken & Dickinson (2013), was also situated within the framework of Wenger and Giddens. This study differs from the early study. It examines student perceptions of course structures designed to provide non-evaluative third spaces as a means for promoting and developing community within the course.

Rationale for this Research

In the earlier study examining Community of Practice in this program, Marken & Dickinson (2013) explained their focus on Community of Practice (p. 301) versus other types of learning communities such as Communities of Inquiry and Communities of Learning. The study reported in this paper continues to utilize a communities of practice framework. The purpose of the Marken & Dickinson study was to explore community engagement at an early stage of graduate study in order to enhance conditions in online courses that lead to better retention, engagement, and motivation in an academic setting with the hope that these enhanced conditions will translate to practice. Similarly, the current study explores community participation as one means to facilitate the collaborative disposition desired within the school library profession.

Learning in a Social Context

Lave and Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning Theory suggests that learning is a social process that includes social interaction and collaboration. They suggest that social culture surrounding learning causes learning to appear more unintentional than the deliberate, abstract knowledge transfer that occurs in most educational settings today. When learning takes place through such a posture, it feels more authentic and natural. Authentic Learning (Newmann, 1991) occurs as a function of its surroundings. Engagement in a task is parallel to real work application; therefore the context and application of knowledge are emphasized rather than fact memorization.

Situated Learning originally thrived in more "hands-on" environments such as workshops, kitchens, and military training centers. However, applications in alternative settings (Ben-Ari, 2005) allow for the extension of pedagogical practices to include authentic learning tasks and interactions that benefit today's online learner. Although all virtual communities are learning communities because members engage in learning through involvement, not all are communities of practice (Barab & Duffey, 2000). Wenger (1998) states that communities of practice create opportunities for learning through real practice in workplace contexts.

Communities of practice surround each of us everyday as the groups of people who share a concern or passion for something and interact regularly to learn to do it better; people who have a shared practice

with sustained interaction. One defining feature of a successful community of practice is a mutual engagement in discussion and activities that allow members to share knowledge with each other. Learning can therefore happen as a result of participation more than through an acquisition of predetermined skills. Knowing, learning and sharing knowledge are each accomplished as a part of belonging to the community, rather than as unique elements completed for their own benefit (Wenger, 2000).

Just as school libraries focus on the learner, so too, must school librarian preparation programs focus on developing school librarians able to interact and engage with learning and knowledge. Studies in which a communities of practice model is employed (Buckley, 2015; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kymes & Ray, 2012) show increased retention and engagement among students in the programs. Planty *et al.* (2009) predict the number of graduate students taking courses online to be 2.7 million by 2018. Many of these will be students previously identified as "nontraditional," or those working fulltime while balancing competing priorities of family, home and personal lives (Brickell, 1995; Dow, 2008; Hayes-Burton, 2003). Students may have been away from academia for some period of years, sometimes decades, prior to beginning graduate work on their current degree. An online format and the demographic of the school library learner challenges library education to establish new pedagogical best practices (Henri & Pudelko, 2003; Moore, 2007). Kift & Nelson (2005) suggest that experiences in higher education must engage learners in ways that are purposely embedded, integrated and coordinated within coursework (p. 226). This is necessary to provide students with a sense of belonging through engagement and connectedness. Carr (2009) maintains retention rates will increase by lessening student isolation and providing support networks for online students. Course designs with high lev-

els of expected discussion, project-based learning and authentic practice allow the non-traditional learner to draw on previous professional and personal experiences. (Kymes & Ray, 2012, p. 35). Situating new learning with prior knowledge within the social context of learner engagement allows future school librarians to participate within the larger community.

Radical Change in Student Behaviors

In *Radical Change*, Dresang (1999) suggest that Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice is a good framework for thinking about learning in a digital context and as related to her theory of radical change (1999, p. 71). Dresang clearly envisioned an online community characterized by connectivity, interactivity and access. Dresang saw these three principles of the digital age evident in radical changes that she saw sweeping through children's and young adult literature and with what she called the "handheld book." She found this paradigm shift in books that displayed characteristics of connectivity to community and new perspectives, interactivity as readers determined their own paths through a text, and access that broke previous boundaries in content and dissemination of ideas and information. Although originally, Radical Change theory was applied to children's literature, it was soon established that the principles of the theory could be applied to other facets of the learner's information seeking behavior (Dresang & Koh, 2009).

Wenger's (1998) engagement, imagination, and alignment are "modes of belonging" and provide a natural fit with Dresang's three principles of engagement with media and information particularly as applied to the online classroom. Dresang's principal of interactivity clearly relates to Wenger's mode of engagement. In an online environment, the learner has choices about how and when to engage with the content and with classmates and the in-

structor. Connectivity implies alignment. Much as a garden hose must be aligned before it can be connected to the spigot, the online classroom needs structures that require students to align their engagement with the course content, with each other, and with course goals. Common assignments and due dates provide learners with a shared purpose and a reason to interact with each other. Access is clearly necessary for Wenger's mode of imagination. By breaking down barriers, access allows learners to imagine themselves in other times and places and in particular to see themselves in a future role as a librarian.

Structure Informed through Interaction

Student intentions and deliberate interactions inform the conceptual framework of Giddens (1984) Structuration Theory. Developed on the premise that interaction alters structure, this theory has three basic tenets: agency, structure, and the duality of structure (Rose & Scheepers, 2001). Agency refers to individuals and their interactions with other individuals (Giddens, 1984). By virtue of the experience of being human, individuals are constantly creating their own life experiences. These experiences, or social interactions, are unique to each individual based on their background and previous experiences. Individuals are sometimes motivated to act because they consciously make a decision to act and at other times, their actions occur without conscious thought as to their motivation. Giddens' second tenet of structuration theory is the rules and regulations that guide our society. These are the societal norms that are developed and stabilized over time. The essence of Giddens' theory is the combination of the two concepts: human agency and the structure of society. He labels this as the duality of structure. When humans interact with others, they bring their experiences with them. In doing so, together they decide on how society should be changed to reflect their beliefs. So, the duality of structure has humans interacting and as they do so, they change the society they originally created. This applies to the community of practice established in the pre-service administration class described in this research. The students belong to this community of practice by virtue of enrolling for the class. As they interact, they change the culture of the existing community of practice by contributing their own experiences and backgrounds.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to examine the integration of a shared third space in an introductory, online school library course. It sought to investigate how this shift in the digital environment facilitated and promoted collaboration and participation in a community of practice. The following research question and subquestions guided the investigation:

1. How is participation in Community of Practice promoted in an online course?
2. What kinds of third spaces did students identify?
3. What meanings do these interactions and third spaces have for participants?

Methodology and Data

Data were collected from multiple class sections of our introductory school library course in the USA during the Fall (Autumn) 2014 semester. LIBS 675 *Administration, Management, and Evaluation of Libraries* is designed as the gateway course to the school library preparation program and is typically the first or second course students take in the program. Enrollment in the course was moderate and we had 50 students across three class sections. Course sections were comprised of students currently working as classroom teachers at all levels, K-12.

Several course structures were explicitly created for student use to establish a

non-evaluative third space. To introduce the topic of Community of Practice, enrolled students were required to submit an early essay about the meaning of a community of practice and their role in a class community of practice. They were asked to revisit that essay with a final reflective essay at the end of the semester. Additionally, structures attempting to mitigate the perceived barriers of time, commitment to development of community, and technology issues were incorporated to this iteration of the course.

Multiple course structures were consistently included in each section of the course. The instructor held weekly office hours and also moderated this space. Students were required to attend at least once during the first three weeks of class to become familiar with the space but further attendance was voluntary. Students participated through the type-chat feature, while the instructor was on camera and responded verbally.

Each course section contained a forum in the discussion board titled *Hallway Chatter*. The *Hallway Chatter* forum contained these instructions:

> This is a space for you to talk with each other—the kind of "Hi, How are you?" conversations you might have in the hallway during class breaks. Use this space to get to know each other and to share humor and celebrations as well as information about the LIBS program.

Draft critiques were an additional component of the discussion forums. Students in the course had the opportunity to publically post drafts of assignments in any stage for review and comment by both instructor and peers throughout the course.

In order to investigate student meaning placed on these spaces, two students from each of the sections were randomly selected to participate in a brief interview. These interviews focused on student participation in these third spaces and the meanings of the interactions. They were conducted after final grades for the course

had been submitted. Data from interview transcripts were analyzed inductively using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and examined for emergent patterns. Each unit of data was analyzed first by asking, "What kind of interaction does this represent?" Units of analysis were determined by segments of meaning and might be as short as "LOL," or might consist of several sentences describing an event within the course or at home. Responses were analyzed regarding the meanings participants made of communities of practice and how they saw themselves participating through the third spaces and in the community of practice in the online class. Each researcher analyzed data independently and then the research team met to discuss and reach consensus about emergent codes. Types of interactions uncovered in the analysis included personal anecdotes, requests for information or assistance, and sharing of current events.

The codes that emerged from the interviews were categorized into themes along Wenger's (1998) modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Responses were coded as "engagement" when they dealt with the student's active involvement in the class and the spaces provided for interaction. When students spoke of themselves as future librarians or referenced their future library, these were coded as "imagination." Alignment, on the other hand, dealt with themselves in the present as they worked to coordinate their efforts with course requirements.

Findings

School library students assigned multiple meanings to their participation in a community of practice and how the third spaces within the course facilitated community. Qualitative analysis of the data revealed several trends organized along Wenger's (1998) three modes of belonging. Wenger argues these emerging themes are not mutually exclusive, and are

best conceptualized as interrelated. This interweaving of the three modes mirrors our findings.

Engagement-Alignment

In addressing the primary research question, how community is promoted in an online course, participants initially describe activities congruent with *alignment*. These activities allow the online community of learners to socially organize and produce products within the course. Activities were structured by the library faculty and were developed as expectations for the students in the course to meet. While the instructors facilitated the spaces, the intent was for students to begin to develop within the community and to situate themselves as shared members. The participants of the study noted ways in which they interacted through course expectations, blurring their sense of belonging to include engagement along with alignment. Participants discussed the course delivery structures, such as Blackboard, the course management system, and use of monitored tools, such as discussion board posts and required peer responses. Allison described this tension of engaged alignment when she explained,

> Having the requirements for leaving feedback for each other—I think it allowed us to get to know each other—though it was forced. Which is okay because I think that, at least for me, if I'm not told that I have to do something then I might be like, oh, I don't need to say anything about this, or somebody else already said it. . . . So I feel like that kind of helps (33–37).

Participants extended the conversation to include unmonitored third spaces such as voluntary office hours and the hallway chatter forum. "I definitely think it was a community building experience for us to be there [in office hours] and especially at the beginning of 675, there's the, I don't know if it was an official requirement, but the suggestion that we should stop by office hours" (April). Virginia further describes how the hallway chatter forum helped build community.

> Being able to read through my classmates posts and just hear what they had to say helped to build the community a lot and not only on our assignments but the hallway chatter board that we have is also just a great way for us to share things that don't necessarily have to do with the class, but just as our lives as educators (21–25).

Additionally, course expectations that represent potential barriers to community were discussed. Reports of challenges brought about by course structure, rigid expectations, and time commitments were included as students negotiated the various commitments with course expectations. Though the course is designed to be asynchronous and the collaboration spaces were primarily voluntary, Jean represents most participants when she states,

> Most of us were taking other courses, were working full time, we have families, so umm just being committed to going there each week and going there for each module and really kind of taking our time to utilize the discussion board the way it should be, I think I struggled with that just, maybe not because of the way it was set up, just because of outside factors. I would like to have been probably more active in the discussion board than I was . . ." (30–36).

Similar demands of course expectations and online learning were verbalized as students negotiated the types of occurrences that happened in both the course structures and the created third spaces. Multiple opportunities for engagement helped mitigate some of the barriers to forming community and created a perception of value for these spaces within the online course.

Engagement

Engagement represented opportunities to form relationships and purposely interact with others. These types of interac-

tions were used to facilitate communication, interest, and support across a variety of spaces. Students expressed value in the third space environments. April, in discussing online office hours stated:

> I go because I don't want to miss anything . . . that really helps . . . it's another way to kinda meet people and see them when they're not on all the time, I guess, and they're not just posting on the discussion board to get credit or whatever. They're there because they have made time or have questions or they just wanna be there (58–64).

Jean compared the online environment with the face to face environment and indicated that in the online environment she needed to be more engaged. She states: "You have a commitment to get there (in a face to face class) . . . after that class period is over, that 90 minute or hour and 45 minutes that you can kinda say, . . . been there done that, get your work done, and I think its much more isolated" (53–60). She continues: I think this (online environment) does take much more of an active commitment to participate and really make use of it. . . . You have to interact with one another for it to be a community of practice" (61–64).

Though initially this study aimed to examine constructs within the course identified as a third space and developed by the faculty, participants identified multiple additional spaces in which they were engaged with their class community outside the course structures. Participants continued their development of community and reported using school district email, text messaging, social media, and face to face meetings as alternate third space collaborative environments in which to engage. Allison shared, "There have been some people in (the district) that we've been emailing through the (district) email. And I've exchanged emails and phone numbers and texted with a couple of people (outside of the district)" (97–98).

For others, engagement has had a broader impact on practice, expanding their knowledge to additional technology and collaboration tools. Susan stated: "For the first time ever I worked on a Google Doc with classmates" (97). She continued: "Not just the Google doc but the little Google Chat IM type thing" (69). Susan also stated: "Google Docs was an experience for me collaboration-wise and a beneficial one" (72).

Engagement-Imagination

Imagination allowed students to explore the experience as an outsider and reflect on experiences they perceived to occur. Participants imagined other scenarios including past experiences in face to face courses, alternate ways of engaging in communities, and future roles for themselves as school librarians. They compared their experiences in this online class to other course scenarios. For example, Jean compares her experiences in the past in a face to face class with this one, "I don't know that I talked to many of my peers when I went to class, it was kinda like 'go to class, do what you've gotta do, leave, go home, do your work, submit it, done.' So I think that this does take much more of an active commitment to participate and to really make use of it" (Jean, 58–61).

Additionally, participants employed imagination when describing an image of community, one's place within it, and its place within a larger context in an effort to imagine options and possibilities for themselves (Wenger, 1998, p. 227). They often imagined an ideal community membership and talked about the kinds of commitments needed: "I just felt like I didn't do my job as well as I could have being a community member last semester. I'm trying more this year, this semester" (Courtney, 39–40) or "If they are not making their presence online then you can't really build a relationship with them because they are not participating as much" (Allison, 48–51).

Participants clearly saw the ways that

an online course might be isolating and the need for connection. April stated, "Especially being online, you kinda feel like you're on an island all by yourself, and so knowing that there are other people going through the same things" (April, 7–8). Here, too, technology clearly had the potential to forge new connections as well, "It's a new kind of community that has been brought about with this new age of technology and it helps me feel connected to people who are interested in the same things I'm interested in and who want to learn" (Virginia, 89–91).

Participants also imagined future positions and how school librarians engage in the larger network of "libraryland." The requirements for participation were clearly relevant for many participants as they spoke about their personal growth in the program. "Everything you do in a class leads to communicating in the outside world and your job" (Courtney, 25–6). Students appreciated getting to know other students who would become future colleagues and gaining insights into other grade levels and educational settings as captured by Allison in these two statements:

> If I am put in a position where I have to be working at an upper level I'm not going to feel so blindsided going into it (Allison, 24).

> I feel like it's going to be helpful knowing people going into our careers—our hopeful careers, hopefully (Allison, 142–143).

Virginia and April both expressed an awareness of their growth as professionals: "I care about what I'm learning about and I want to grow as an educator" (Virginia, 13). "There is this sense that everyone is excited about and invested in growing together" (April, 179–180).

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study we explored how the use of several types of third space structures promoted a sense of belonging for students and examined the meanings these spaces hold for students. Participants negotiated their belonging within each of the three modes according to their interactions within the course and the third spaces as they formed their identity within the community. Through our findings, participants report a growth in their own understanding of community as it relates to an online community of learners, and to a community of practice as it relates to the library profession as a whole.

An understanding of what features of online learning most powerfully allowed students to form a community of practice was informed by Dresang's (1999) principles of the digital environment: interactivity, connectivity, and access and related to Wenger's modes of belonging. Dresang was describing radical change in books for young readers but one could argue that these principles also apply to radical change in the delivery of course instruction through online media. Digital media provided kinds of interactivity, connectivity, and access that students would not have found in a face to face classroom. Interactivity in Dresang's typology "refers to dynamic, nonlinear, and nonsequential learning and information behavior with an increasing sense of control by end-users" (Dresang & Koh, 2009, p.26). Students have significant choice and agency in asynchronous online courses about the times and spaces where they engage. For many the result is that online learning demanded more engagement than a face to face class. The online classroom, content, and the ideas of their classmates were available 24-7. As one of our students suggested in a face to face classroom you showed up once a week in the classroom and then went home and back to your separate life. The 24-7 nature of an online classroom allowed students the OPTION to engage with content and with each other in a variety of spaces and times. As Dresang suggests interactivity allows members to choose different modes of engage-

ment and so some students attended online office hours and others didn't. Some met classmates in person while others texted or phoned each other.

Wenger (1998) suggests that learning cannot be designed but that one can design "for learning" (p. 229). In the principal of connectivity and Wenger's mode of alignment, we discovered that the structures that instructors created in the online classroom allowed students to make connections with each other through the content. While Dresang & Koh (2009) spoke of connectivity as "Refers to sense of community or construction of social worlds that emerge from changing perspectives and expanded associations" (p. 27) we also saw Wenger's alignment as key. Course structures and assignments provided the material and often the venues for students to connect to each other. Some assignments required working with another classmate or allowed students to connect in real time with faculty and with others in the class. Students found each other through the common assignments and in the common spaces. Alignment allowed them to create connections and build a sense of community. Students who aligned their efforts with our design connected to different perspectives and associations beyond their own experiences. Together, they created a social world, a community. This new social world reflects Giddens (1984) structuration theory as the students redesigned their world based on their previous knowledge and new experiences.

Imagination allowed students to access other visions of themselves such as acting as a better student or as a future librarian. Clearly the digital world allows for all kinds of access and broad imaginative possibilities. Students can see into each other's schools and practices through sharing of videos and written observations. They found online role models through bloggers and twitter feeds. Students in urban divisions shared experiences with students in isolated, rural regions of the state.

Elementary teachers got to see high school practices. Small libraries and large, well-resourced libraries were all highlighted through student sharing of their own local contexts allowing breaking information barriers created by distance and time.

The formation of community is a value held by the school library profession and an elusive goal for many online programs where students do not have the opportunity to collaborate and engage with classmates or the instructor face to face. This study demonstrates how providing a shared space in online courses facilitates collaboration through a community of practice for pre-service school librarians. It builds on the earlier work of Marken and Dickinson (2013) who found that active participation was an important component of community formation for students in an online course. The current study expands the exploration of participation along the lines of Wenger's (1998) modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Additionally, it provides insights into the way emerging school librarians develop their communities of practice, which assist in shaping their identities and collaborative pedagogies through guided support from more experienced school library teacher educators. The barriers of time and participation continue to exist but the concerns about technological difficulties expressed in that earlier study have given way to the reported use of multiple communication venues such as texting and sharing Google docs. While students still mention the challenge of not meeting face to face, they also seem to now imagine new possibilities for community in a digital context.

The question is not what we can do now because we are online—the question for us is how can LIS educators create community and community of practice in an online format? Exploring different pedagogical structures that can be developed for students entering the school library profession allows for an equal opportunity for engagement. The findings of this study

are significant for all library educators as instruction increasingly moves into online spaces.

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