Why learn in isolation when we can learn in a community of practice?

Karla Del Carpio Ovando

1

Abstract

In this paper, the concept of sense of community, which is considered to be a fundamental element in education, is explored. The questions that are addressed are: What is a community? How does this understanding relate to curriculum and pedagogy nowadays? What does the author mean by community as it relates to her inquiry? The paper discusses the definition of communities of practice, its beginnings and characteristics such as the domain, the community and the practice. In addition, the relationships between schools and communities are discussed as well as the relation between the curriculum and the community and its implications. A language school in Mexico, its vision and its characteristics are used to exemplify a community of practice. It is concluded that it is necessary that the way educators, policymakers, parents and students think of schools as communities where people and their connections with others are important rather than as simple institutions where teachers are expected to fill students with information. One of the first steps to be able to improve the curriculum is to change the conception of education and schools. Also, there is no need for students to feel lonely while learning when they can instead feel part of a community of practice, which might make the teaching and learning process more meaningful and enjoyable and therefore more successful.

Key words: community of practice, education, school, curriculum

¿Por qué estudiar en el aislamiento cuando se puede aprender en una comunidad de práctica de aprendizaje?

Resumen:

En este trabajo se explora el concepto y el sentido de "comunidad", que se considera como un elemento fundamental en la educación. Las preguntas que se abordan son: ¿Qué es una comunidad? ¿Cómo esta comprensión se refiere a planes de estudio y a la pedagogía en la actualidad? ¿Qué quiere decir el autor con la comunidad en lo que respecta a su pregunta? El documento analiza la definición de "comunidades de práctica de aprendizaje", sus inicios y características tales como el dominio, la comunidad y la práctica. Además, se analizan las relaciones entre las escuelas y las comunidades, así como la relación entre el plan de estudios y la comunidad y sus implicaciones. Una escuela de idiomas en México, su visión y sus características se utilizan para ejemplificar una comunidad de práctica. Se concluye que es necesario que la forma en que los educadores, responsables políticos, padres y estudiantes piensen las

escuelas como comunidades donde las personas y sus conexiones con los demás son importantes, más que como simples instituciones donde se espera que los maestros llenen a los estudiantes de información. Uno de los primeros pasos para ser capaces de mejorar el plan de estudios es cambiar la concepción de la educación y las escuelas. Además, no hay necesidad para que los estudiantes se sienten solos, se han de sentir parte de una comunidad de práctica de aprendizaje, lo que podría hacer que el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje más significativo y agradable y por lo tanto con más éxito.

Palabras clave: comunidad de práctica, educación, escuela, currículo.

The purpose of Education

"The general purpose of education is to foster the growth of what is individual in each human being, at the same time harmonizing the individuality thus educed with the organic unity of the social group to which the individual belongs...in this process aesthetic education is fundamental" (Read, 1943, p. 8).

Justification

Through my experience as a language learner and teacher and currently as a researcher interested in Bilingual Education in Southeast Mexico, I have become more aware of how interested I am in the social vision of education, especially in the second language field. For that reason, I feel encouraged to explore in this paper, in a curricular and pedagogical manner, one of the key concepts that characterizes my research interest and the way I see education. That is, the *sense of community* element that I consider very important in the teaching of second languages. Thus, the aim of this paper is to answer the following questions: What is a community? And How does this understanding relate to curriculum and pedagogy nowadays?

Introduction

When I was an undergraduate student learning languages in Mexico, I felt very comfortable and motivated to learn when my teachers created an environment where all students could interact with each other, could express their ideas with respect and were given enough opportunities to have an active role in their own learning process. In other words, I felt part of a community where I had an important role and were

motivated to learn. For these reasons, I think that one of the tools teachers can use to motivate students is by creating a sense of community in the classroom. By doing so, students' and teachers' feelings of isolation, alienation and hopeleness in the school (Conley, 1991; Noddings, 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1988) are less likely to take place. We are human beings and part of our nature is the need to be part of a community, so school is not a place to be isolated, but to be involved and integrated. By doing so, students' opportunities to develop their social skills might increase and they continue living in a community, which guides them to know how to contribute to the society they live in.

Communities of Practice

According to Wenger (2006), to have the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together. Interactions are essential to make a community of practice. This shows the importance for teachers to create conditions for not just information exchange, but social interaction. White (2008) states that *"from a learning theory perspective, a lot of learning is social, meaning it happens between us, not always as a solo activity"* (para.3). Therefore, Smith (1999) states that *"learning involves participation in a community of practice"* (para. 1).

A community of practice is defined as groups of individuals who share a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact. A community of practice has the following characteristics:

- *The domain*: A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. The collective competence and learning from each other is valued (Wenger, 2006, para. 6).

- *The community:* In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. Members of a community of practice do not necessarily work together on a daily basis (Wenger, 2006, para. 7).

- ***The practice:*** Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems; in short a shared practice. The development of a shared practice may be more or less self-conscious (Wenger, 2006, para. 8).

A community of practice should have a combination of the previous elements. Also, they are needed so that a community can be cultivated. Every person belongs to communities of practice and travel through different communities over the course of his or her life.

Schools and Community

According to Araujoviedo (2004), the school is an organization influenced by contemporary paradigms and has fallen into the hands of globalization. It is assumed that learning is the result of teaching and that it has a beginning and an end, which is a wrong idea difficult to change in educational institutions. If we actually run schools as communities of practice, the possibilities for meaningful and long-term learning are higher. It is important to consider the effects that communities of practices have on the different dimensions of educational practices:

> *"Internally: How to organize educational experiences that ground school learning in practice through participation in communities around subject matters?*
>
> *Externally: How to connect the experience of students to actual practice through peripheral forms of participation in broader communities beyond the walls of the school?*
>
> *Over the lifetime of students: How to serve the lifelong learning needs of students by organizing communities of practice focused on topics of continuing interest to students beyond the initial schooling period?"* (Wenger, 2006, para. 3).

Reflecting on the previous questions could help us create real schools that prepare students for life. Also, if schools consider students' needs and interests, the possibilities for learning to take place may increase as well as the possibilities for creating a community in the classroom and the school in general. It is important to shift the school perspective towards a more caring and social direction, which can start by paying attention to what happens in the classroom. According to Dornyei (2003), the atmosphere in the classroom and the contextual surroundings of action have a great

impact on students' motivation. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the interaction between the teacher and the students and the students themselves as well as the type of activities that allow learning and interaction.

According to Mitson (1980), sometimes we forget that *"every school is, must be, a community school to a greater or lesser, or better or worse, degree"* (p.102). The validity of any school's regard for itself as a community school must depend on the relevance and quality of the community resources that it makes use of and the aspects of curriculum that it values. The use of learning resources to create the learning environment is related to what is called "hidden curriculum". This applies to what the learner acquires by implication of the situation he finds himself placed in or from the learning environment that has been created for him. The message the teacher may want his or her students to receive may not be implicit or explicit and can be illustrated by students' questions such as *"How can I hear what you say, when what you are is thundering in my ears?"* (Mitson, 1980, p. 102). To be a member of a community requires sharing together, despite the individual differences, in a common major purpose. Thus, it is expected that teachers and students become partners in the enterprise of learning. To do so, we need educators that develop in themselves *"a caring and loving attitude toward the student, which is indispensable on the part of one who is committed to teaching and to the education process itself"*(Freire, n.d. para. 30).

The Teacher

The teacher plays a very important role in students' learning process as well as in their level of motivation. For example, in my experience as a language learner, I found that teachers who were approachable, charismatic, open to students' ideas, needs and suggestions and had a positive attitude towards teaching, were great motivators. As a result, I felt engaged in class and enjoyed learning. I agree with Savignon (1997) that *"teaching requires a sense of community – an environment of trust and mutual confidence wherein learners may interact without fear or threat of failure"* (p. 122). Also, students need to be provided with the same opportunities and teachers need to value and respect their students' contributions. The main problem is that some teachers do not adapt their teaching approach to their students learning style and needs although

they may be aware of the diversity that exists in the classroom. Thus, it is necessary that teachers balance their classroom activities, for example, so that different parts of the lesson address different learning styles.

We should not forget that any course needs to be rather diverse in content, varying markedly with the skills and interests of the teachers, and the needs of the students and the communities in which they live. There might well be common guidelines, but the exact content and the way in which it was sequenced and taught needs to be adapted to each individual school. I agree that:

The new education must teach the individual how to classify and reclassify information, how to evaluate its veracity, how to change categories when necessary, how to move from the concrete to the abstract and to the back, how to look at problems from a new direction-how to teach himself. Tomorrow's illiterate will not be the man who can't read-he will be the man who has not learned how to read (Gerjouy, 1980, p.103).

Curriculum and the Community

According to Hargreaves (1982, p. 113),

> *"if we are to provide a rationale and set of purposes for comprehensive schools, we cannot be content with the limited justification that the comprehensive system permits us to abolish selections at eleven-plus, that it furthers meritocratic ends, and that it is somehow a good thing that all secondary-school pupils should be educated in a common school"*.

Thus, he encourages us to answer the following questions: *"what kind of society do we want to create and how can the education system help us to realize such a society?"* (p.113). He considers that the answers for those questions can help us determine the relation between education and society into our present time.

A community-centred curriculum has the purpose of providing students with the knowledge and abilities that help them to be useful members of their communities therefore the school should consider the students' sociocultural reality and life itself. Unfortunately, the school has focused on having the student to memorize information and not on helping them to develop their reflective skills or to express what they know, what they feel or to learn to make decisions (Hernández, 2009). Also, the school has not

paid significant attention to prepare students to interact with others, for example, with those who have ideas and opinions different to theirs. According to Hernández (2009), the school is far from being related to life and it has contributed to have a violent and intolerant society.

Fortunately, there have been innovations in the field of education, for example, the emergence of the community school, which is characterized by being dynamic, challenging and by having an experiential curriculum (Community School, 2012). Also, the community school is known by ensuring that each student receives individual attention as well as by encouraging students to become confident speakers, critical thinkers, and caring people.

It is fundamental to remember that every person belongs to different communities, so schools need to prepare students to successfully participate in each of them as this requires diverse knowledge and skills. By doing this, students will be able to better interact with others and to show respect for them. The curriculum, teachers and the school need to aim to prepare students for life and not for an exam. Achieving such a goal would mean that the real purpose of education has been achieved.

Reflections

Having the opportunity to investigate in further detail the sense of community I consider to be important in education has helped me gain a better understanding of the concept of *community*. Also, it has made me wonder where the reason for my research interest comes from apart from the reasons I provided in the introduction of this paper. I was and I am still struggling to find the root of my interest and I am not implying I have discovered it all. However, thinking about my past and my present, comparing and contrasting them has given me a better idea of why I believe schools should be communities.

Being an international student in Canada has been a very interesting and challenging adventure where I have experienced difficulties when trying to adapt to a new culture, language, society, educational system and values. I believe that being abroad is a good opportunity to learn more about yourself, but might also lead to confusion about your

own identity. Some of the challenges I have faced here in Canada is isolation, not in a very significant way, but definitely more than at home. I feel it is important to remember to *"think thou how that this is not our home in this world, in which we are strangers, one not knowing another's speech and language."* (The Diary of Samuel Ward, 1595, as cited in Zhou (2002)). It is due to isolation that I have felt encouraged to pay more attention to how my students feel in the classroom. I wonder if they feel isolated, excluded or ignored even though they are surrounded by many people. Thus, I try to create a sense of community in the classroom where students feel comfortable, safe and feel their opinion is valued. Also, I try to provide them with enough opportunities to interact with their classmates where they can learn more about the other, but also about themselves.

Mexican Language Schools and the Community

> *Another reason that I think motivates my interest in the concept of community are the ideas of community some schools in Mexico have. That is, they are based on culture, diversity and experiences. For example, there are schools in Chiapas (a state located in southeast Mexico) that sponsor and organize a variety of cultural and educational events in support of popular struggles for dignity, democracy and justice. These institutions promote indigenous languages and traditions so that they can be preserved. A good example of that is the language school* **"La Casa en el Árbol"** *(the Treehouse).*

"La Casa en el Árbol" School (n.d.) from http://www.lacasaenelarbol.org/

> *This school is located in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, a colonial town with a mixture of traditional Mayan culture, indigenous groups and cosmopolitanism. This town is one of the most visited places in Mexico due to its natural beauty, cultural diversity and history.*
>
> *"La Casa en el Árbol" school considers it is important to understand that each learner has special needs and interests, so one of their strongest points is their flexibility to personalize their language program to tailor-fit each student according to their needs (Guillard, 2008). This school considers that students should familiarize themselves with the political and social situation of the country in which they study, in this case, Mexico.*

Beyond the social implications of this, they believe that if a student lives and understands the culture of Mexico, the language learning process can be more effective.

Also, the teachers who work at "La Casa en el Árbol" provide personalized attention to every student as they consider each learner is a unique individual with his/her own culture, point of view, concerns, needs and requirements. I appreciate how the teachers at this school aim to have inclusive teaching. That is, they try to be open to diversity of students' cultural background, which can be used as a means to create classroom harmony (Williams, 2007). Teachers at "La Casa en el Árbol" think that students' own identity, language and culture play an important role when learning a second language. As a result, learners are not expected to abandon their own identity, language or culture.

"La Casa en el Árbol" considers it is important to provide students with a pleasant and low-anxiety atmosphere so that effective learning can take place.

Also, one of their main concerns is to maintain a high academic level by engaging highly motivated and qualified teachers who do their best to create a community in the classroom. In other words, teachers believe that it is essential that students interact with each other in order to practice the target the language, but also to create a community in the classroom where students feel their own language, culture and identity are valued. Also, teachers at "La Casa en el Árbol" think that by having students interacting, they can learn from each other, but also learn about themselves.

> *Since "La Casa en el Árbol" is located in a very touristy region, Spanish lessons are also taught for international tourists who want to learn the local language. They also learn and experience the local culture. A good way to do so is through the volunteer programs this school has in the surroundings of San Cristóbal and within Chiapas. The volunteer work along with people of local communities requires students to carry out physical and environmental tasks such as teaching in schools, planting trees, taking care of turtles, cleaning up streets, building vegetable gardens and other activities. In my opinion, these volunteer activities are great opportunities to help and bring people together and create or reinforce the sense of community among themselves in a realistic context.*

I believe that "La Casa en el Árbol" is a good example of how schools can be communities where students can learn the target language and culture, but can also be connected to who they are. That is, students' own language, culture and identity are considered as tools that can help them learn the second language rather than obstacles that impede its acquisition. Thus, I think it is important to promote the idea of schools

as communities because it is possible to achieve such a goal. For example, our classroom can be more than a room with students. It can be a space where students *"feel safe, that they belong, and share a sense of responsibility for one another"* (Schricker, n.d., para. 1), which can be done by creating a nice environment in the classroom.

Students need to have a say in the decisions made by the teacher, for instance, in how the classroom should be arranged. Therefore, learners should be asked for ideas of how they want their space to look. Classrooms should reflect our students' diversity. Their different backgrounds, languages and cultures can be used to create a rich and interesting classroom community.

The experience at "La Casa en el Árbol" is a good example of how the learning process can be a great opportunity to bring people together despite the differences that every individual has. Learning to learn about and appreciate our differences can help us create a safe atmosphere for students to learn and grow.

> *"Discussions are also a great method to take advantage of teachable moments. When something happens in the school yard or in the class, a class discussion will help students work through their emotions and learn effective ways to get along with others. These open discussions generate a sense of belonging and security in the group"* (Shricker, n.d., para. 2).

In addition, we should remember that learning also takes place beyond the walls of our classroom, for instance, when working at volunteering activities with local communities as done at "La Casa en el Árbol." Having students to work along with the local community can be very beneficial as students have the opportunity to immerse in the target culture and feel integrated. Also, they learn from others, from themselves and become more sensitive to other people's needs. Learners can also reinforce their values such as the importance of sharing, respecting and being humble. For all this, I believe that considering the performance of volunteering work in educational programs is important as it can help us create a real community.

Final Thoughts

The ideas previously mentioned have encouraged me to think about my position as a teacher and a researcher. I think that it is necessary that the way educators,

policymakers, parents and students think of schools as communities where people and their connections with others are important rather than as simple institutions where teachers are expected to fill students with information. I think that one of the first steps to be able to improve the curriculum is to change the conception of education and schools. Also, I consider that it is important to have a clear conceptualization of community, and also of the specific values and commitments that such a conceptualization embodies (Sergiovanni, 1994). Being aware and exploring the challenges involved in such an undertaking is the first step towards creating and recreating schools in which students, teachers and administrators engage in meaningful and communal relationships. Also, it is the first step towards a more just and caring society (Sergiovanni, 1994) where students learn within a community of practice instead of learning in isolation. There is no need for students to feel lonely while learning when they can feel part of a community of practice. If we feel integrated, the teaching and learning process can be more meaningful, enjoyable, and therefore more successful.

Schools need to prepare our students for real life. To do so, we need to create communities of practice where students feel valued and respected, so our teaching approach should consider our students' backgrounds and needs as well as their cultural and linguistic diversity. This can support our attempts to involve every student in his/her own learning process. Cooperative learning is a good way to foster and strengthen a sense of community.

Creating different cooperative learning situations has different social and academic advantages. For example, having students to volunteer with local communities as performed at "La Casa en el Árbol" help students learn to work with each other, to develop new skills, to be sensitive to others' needs and to become critical thinkers. Students are social beings therefore they need to be given opportunities to practice their social skills inside and outside the classroom. This can also have a great impact on their motivation to learn, which is an elemental component while learning. For that reason, the way we teach should include excitement, cultural aspects and meaningful topics that take into account our pupils' age and interests. In addition, we ought to use a variety of activities as students have different learning styles. Activities can also be useful to

create an atmosphere that enables students to feel comfortable and safe. In my opinion, it is extremely important to provide that type of setting therefore we need to put effort to create an environment full of energy, harmony and respect.

I know that being a teacher provides you with the opportunity to improve education, which as a result can benefit society as a whole. Therefore, we should always remember that the purpose of education is *"to create responsible, productive and socially contributing citizens-- people who can provide for their own families as well as contribute to their communities"* (Ram, 2010, para. 2). If we have this in mind, the possibilities to create schools as communities and to improve the educational system, in general, are higher. We as teachers as well as curriculum makers and all the people in the educational field need to work together so that the learning process can be a significant journey where every student feels integrated and able to contribute to the community he /she belongs to.

> *"Community - because without people, you just have a pile of content. Or worse... nothing!"* (Sidnick, 2008, para. 1).

References

Araujoviedo, E. (2004). Acerca de paradigmas y creencias. Retrieved July 20th, 2013, from http://www.slieshare.net/enriquearaujoviedo/la-escuela-es-una-organizacin-2573568

Batten, E. (1975). Community education and ideology: A case for radicalism. In C. Fletcher and N. Thompson (Eds.), *Issues in community education* (pp.22-27). Lewes: The Falmer Press.

Community School. (2012). Welcome to community school. Retrieved July 18th, 2013 from http://www.communityschool.com/centennial-celebration

Conley, S. C. (1991). Review of research on teacher preparation in school decision making. *Review of Research in Education*, 17, 225–266.

Dewey, J. (1897). My pedagogic creed. *The School Journal*, 11, 77-80. Retrieved March 5th, 2012, from http://dewey.pragmatism.org/creed.htm

Dornyei, Z. (2003). Attitudes, orientations, and motivations in language learning: Advances in theory, research, and applications. Oxford: Backwell.

Freire, P. (n.d.). The teaching relationship. Retrieved July 18th, 2013 from http://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/topics/relationship.html

Gerjouy, H. (1980).The community College: continuous change. In C. Fletcher & N. Thompson (Eds.), *Issues in community education* (pp.89-100). Lewes: The Falmer Press.

Guillard, N. (2008). *La Casa en el árbol* [The Treehouse]. Retrieved April 3rd, 2012, from http://www.lacasaenelarbol.org/

Hargreaves, D. (1982). *The challenging for the comprehensive school: culture, curriculum and community.* Great Britain: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hernández, J. (2009). Una escuela para la vida: Algunos aspectos de una intervención pedagógica de la UPN en una comunidad indígena. *Revista Universitaria de la Universidad Pedagogica Nacional*, 8(10), 1-10.

La Casa en el árbol. (n.d.). Welcome to our Spanish Immersion School. Retrieved July 21, 2013, from http://www.lacasaenelarbol.org/

Mitson, R. (1980). Resources for learning in community education. In C. Fletcher and N. Thompson (Eds.), *Issues in community education* (pp.101-114). Lewes: The Falmer Press.

Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Ram, S. (2010). The purpose of education - Creating responsible, productive citizens. Retrieved July 21st, 2013, from http://ezinearticles.com/?The-Purpose-of-Education---Creating-Responsible,-Productive-Citizens&id=3558378

Read, H. (1943). *Education through Art*. London: Faber.

Savignon, S. (1997). *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice* (2nd Ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Schricker, S. (n.d.). Classroom as community. Retrieved July 21st, 2013, from http://shannonschricker.com/classroom_management/community.html

Sergiovanni, T. (1994). *Building community in schools.* San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.

Sidnick, D. (2008). *Learning and technology: community*. Retrieved March 27th, 2012, from http://darrensidnick.blogspot.com/2008/08/community-because-without-people-you.html

Smith, M. (1999). The social/situational orientation to learning. Retrieved July 20th, 2013, from http://infed.org/mobi/the-socialsituational-orientation-to-learning/

Ward, S. (1595). *Diary*. In W. Zhou, the lived experience of being a foreigner. Retrieved February, 25th, 2010, from http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/sources/textorium/wu-zhou-the-lived-experience-of-being-a-foreigner/

Wehlage, G., Rutter, R., Smith, G., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. (1988). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support*. London: Falmer Press.

Wenger, E. (2006). *Communities of practice*. Retrieved March 18th, 2012, from http://www.ewenger.com/theory/

White, N. (2008). *Community without people?* Retrieved March 25th, 2012, from http://www.fullcirc.com/wp/2008/09/20/cop-series-3-community-without-people/

13