Building Safe Spaces and Small Craft

Dr. Shane Theunissen, Assistant professor, Child and Youth Study, Mount Saint Vincent University

Abstract

J.N. Little (2011) poses the question "what exists between the traditional binary of practice and academia?" (p.3). This question is articulated in response to a general sense that the theorizing of youth care practice has been overly abstracted at the expense of the human contextual elements that make the practice of youth care a profession about young people and their care. Youth care practice is often described as building safe spaces within which to build relationships with youth. This report documents the theoretical and conceptual foundations for a community boatbuilding program, which, in essence, is a medium through which we can create safe spaces and challenge the dynamics of binary models of community.

Keywords: Community; Accessibility; Boat building; Reflective equilibrium; Integrative powe**r**

Introduction

In this report we will be discussing some of the theoretical processes that have informed our practices in our "Building Boats, Changing Lives" program, which is a collaboration between Mount Saint Vincent University and the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. In this program we introduce boatbuilding and maritime experiences to communities in Nova Scotia. Through the process of building boats we challenge conceptions of community by decentering core community membership and lowering the cost of access to our personal, professional and institutional communities. In this report we will discuss our promotion of accessible communities, which is predicated on Wenger's (1998) conceptions of *communities of practice*. We will further discuss processes of ontological justice informed by Freire (2000) and legitimate peripheral participation as discussed by Lave and Wenger (1991).

Community Boat Building Actualized

The Bevin's Skiff is the objective embodiment of promoting accessibility to the boatbuilding community and the cultural capital embodied within it. The Bevin's Skiff was designed by Joe Youcha in 1992 at the Alexandria Seaport Museum. His idea behind this particular boat was to create a small boat that families could build in a three-day period. It was envisioned that this process would act as a catalyst to creating a community boatbuilding program, because a number of these boats could easily be built and launched at the same time. Further to this, and from a purely practical perspective, when the community groups and youth that build these boats are using saws, drills, hammers, nails, block planes and smoothing planes they get a really enjoyable introduction to woodworking tools and they can see the benefits of the skills they have learned.

Community Boat Building Theorized

Throughout discussions of our boatbuilding program we use the concept of community. Community forms the cornerstone around which we have developed our conceptual framework utilizing the theories of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, Vygotsky's (1966) ideas of primary sociability, Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of cultural and social capital, as well as Lave and Wenger's (1991) conceptions of communities of practice. So when people seek to understand the purpose of boatbuilding as a mechanism for learning and community engagement, we are able to suggest that elements of all those theories are present in the process of a boat building we mobilize as the catalyst for community capacity development. Consequently, when we build boats we are building community because we invite people to participate within our community of practice and invite them to explore how knowledge is created and disseminated. We use Vygotsky (1966), Bronfenbrenner (1977), and Friere (2000) to enable us to deconstruct some of our relationships to education, our environment, and to each other. We engage students, youth and community in discussing how knowledge, community or identity can be created through constructive experience. It is through these discussions that we explore implications of how, and why, knowing may be facilitated through participation in experiences (Bronfenbrenner systems theory) and communities (Vygotsky's primary sociability).

Defining and Deconstructing Power within Communities

When we discuss learning through experiences and community we explore environmental associations, or the learning that is acquired as an outcome of people's interactions with environments. These environments could be constructed environments, such as the classroom and other designed spaces, which might include diverse natural and social contexts. The interactions in these contexts have implications, such as the social discipline of conforming to the norms of a particular space or a particular culture. In disaggregating this further, we typically describe how we interact with each other as social discipline, and recognize how the environmental and physical spaces discipline us in particular ways and temper our relations and interactions accordingly.

Building on this theoretical foundation we can begin to evaluate how we might develop and renegotiate social relationships and learning that are disciplined through particular practices which, over time, can develop into a knowledge base, or skill set, which Bourdieu (1977) called *cultural capital*. Access to this cultural and social capital may be commodified or limited through a myriad of social, political and economic processes. So, when we contemplate the design of communities, or promoting accessibility in communities, it is important to facilitate the process of lowering the cost of access to the community. This, in essence, is an invitation facilitating access to the capital our communities hold. These processes of lowering the cost of access make themselves evident very early on in the boatbuilding activity because building a boat is most easily completed through collaborative effort. To this end, the size and shape of the wood panels used in fabricating the sides of the skiff are too cumbersome for even the most skilled craftsman, working alone, to manipulate effectively. Thus an invitation to participate is initiated as a necessary characteristic of the process of boat building. This requirement for teamwork further, and organically, highlights the value (the assets) of each contributor, regardless of their skill level, to the realization of a shared goal. Thus this approach to community engagement can be viewed as an assets-based approach, where legitimate participation is only contingent on the contribution each individual has the capacity to perform and not evaluated in reference to an extrinsic and assimilative standard that needs to be assumed or embodied. Participation in the community developed through boat building is thus, in this way, an exercise in the negotiation of

social dynamics that challenges individualism while compelling, through collective action, greater community accessibility.

Understanding communities and their dynamics through these types of conceptual structures is derived from Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on communities of practice. Within this conceptualization the community members in the core are the people that have the power. They are the brokers of knowledge within that community, and community members coming from the periphery are entering into the social structure of this community and are learning the community's particular knowledge and practices over time, i.e., gaining capital. As can be seen from this description, it takes work to enter from the periphery to get closer to the core.

In traditional classroom settings we could see the teacher being the carrier of knowledge and a member of the core. The students entering into that classroom community of practice are required to work to conform to the social and environmental discipline demanded of that space. In many respects, this relegates the student entering into that space to a deficit-oriented position vis-a-vis the core community members, i.e., the teacher. This traditional structure for the classroom is predicated on what youth care practitioners call the *deficits approach* (Garfat, 2008; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). This deficits approach is fundamentally undemocratic and typically marginalizes groups who may have difficulty conforming to the norms as determined by the core, in this case the classroom teacher, and the curriculum they teach. However, if a community member is able to conform to the discipline imposed by the community, they are able gain cultural capital in proportion to the legitimacy they acquire in their community membership. The cost of access to community, in this instance, is conformity.

It is important to realize that even in this seemingly reified community structure there are spaces for challenging or decentering the norms as determined by the core. This process of challenging and decentering core values is evident in the boat building process we implement because we lower the cost of access to our community of boat building. Our program makes boatbuilding available to all who would like to participate. We challenge notions of legitimacy through this broad-based accessibility making the boundaries of community more permeable and significantly less reified. These permeable boundaries, as an outcome of a lowered cost of access, facilitate legitimate peripheral community membership. The promotion of this *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave and Wenger, 1991), as initiated through the lowered cost of access to community predicated on an assets-based approach, facilitates the amplification of a greater diversity of voices within the community.

Promoting Accessibility

In choosing to significantly lower the cost of accessing capital in our community of practice we are initiating a paradigm shift away from an assimilative hegemonic deficit model to a model that prioritizes diversity and the intellectual justice of an assets-based approach. The economic, social and intellectual costs of accessing a community are significantly lower in peripheral spaces. So, when we embark on a community boatbuilding project, we are not only lowering the cost of peripheral community membership but are also potentially lowering the cost of access to the core itself. This was introduced in the previous section as *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) a process that, in many ways, challenges conceptions of the positional superiority of knowledge. In contrast to the community of practice described in the hegemonic deficits model of community, we see in the assets-based approach a reconfiguration of community and access. Improved access to community initiates a shift to greater diversity within that community. This greater diversity acts as a catalyst to inter- and intra-community dialogue, which can facilitate a movement from hegemonic models of community to dialogic models of community. In the reconfigured and dialogic community structure (a modification of

Lave and Wenger's legitimate peripheral participation), predicated on an assets-based approach, we have two cores and a shared periphery (see figure 1). This is indicative of a common periphery denoting the lowered cost of community membership; and the two cores, one representing the value of the capital new community members bring to the shared community and the second signifying the cultural capital of the dialogic community's core.
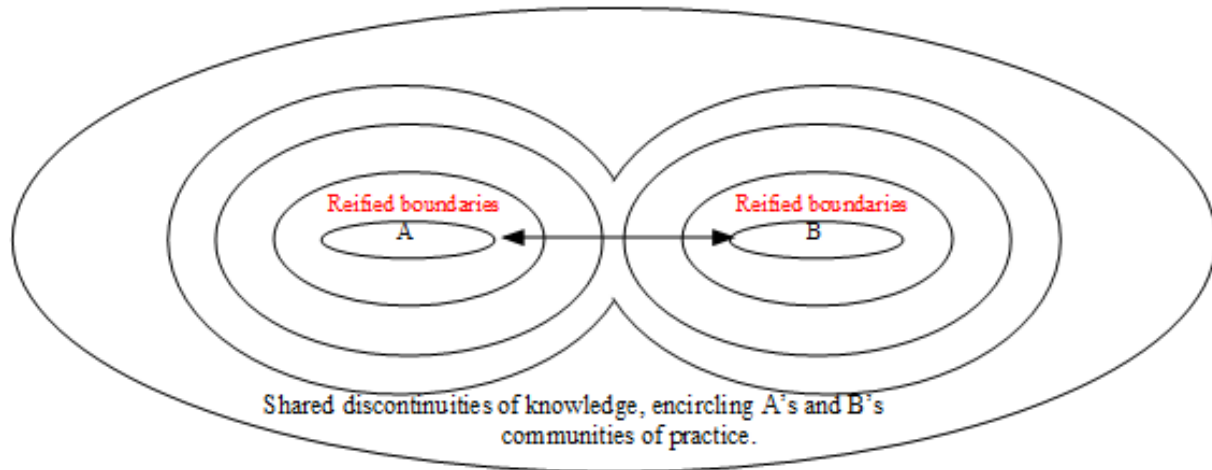

Figure 1: A shared community of practice with dialogic cores: a modification of Lave and Wenger's legitimate peripheral participation.

In this community structure as seen in figure 1, you have participants from community B working to gain legitimacy in the space of community A, and you have members of community A working to gain legitimacy from within community B. What you find, if you put this into the context of the classroom or the context of working with youth, is a community no longer embodying a positional superiority of knowledge where the core represented by the teacher is the holder and arbiter of knowledge. Instead, a shared community is created with diverse forms of community sharing power/capital as *the dialogic cores*. This enables each community to work towards gaining legitimacy within the dialogic between the two cores. This process is explicitly brought to life during the community boatbuilding workshop as participants share their perspectives on problem solving as they interact with the tools, materials, mechanics and concepts of boat building. In most instances individuals participating in this process are tacitly challenged to reflect on their evolving understanding of themselves (Richardson, 2001) and their role as members in a community. A specific example might be a youth who has conventionally been categorized as *at risk* (a deficits approach), who may begin to reflect on their constructive capacities as a boat builder and the implication this has on their membership in community. Further to this, this same youth may engage in dialogic processes of collaboration and problem solving and become cognizant of the amplification of their voice in dialogic processes.

These dialogic processes are essential to the integrative power that facilitates the creation of shared communities. Within these shared communities, as we have described, there is an emphasis on inviting people to participate in community. Wenger (1998) describes this process as "building a fragile bridge of trust" (p.277). In the youth care literature, Garfat (2008) speaks about acts of love or building relationships and describes how we enter into relationships of working together to define community and the knowledge we hold as community members.

Integrative power

An idea essential to the process of integrative power is the concept of humility. As community members who seek to promote a diversity of perspectives, we need to be able to acknowledge that we do not know everything (Freire, 1968) and that we can learn from the skills that the students and youth are bringing into community. These changes in personal and community relations can change our relations within other spheres. If we revisit Freire's conception of entering into dialogue, acknowledging that the other person, community, or context is going to actively contribute to that dialogue and inform or shift our perspective, we may change our relationship to ourselves. We might change our relationship to ourselves because we need to be humble enough to acknowledge that we have something to learn within the interrelations between communities. Thus this process can act as a catalyst to changing our relationships to self and changing our relationship with each other. A specific and personal example is my own epiphany centered on the courage youth embody when venturing beyond their known understanding of themselves to embrace renegotiated identities and membership capacities. I realize now that, through their participation, youth are also extending an invitation that challenges me to understand the world anew as a consequence of a shared, dialogic space of interrelationship.

Reflective equilibrium

Reflective equilibrium is a process whereby we are able to engage in documenting or learning from our changing relations. When our relations shift or evolve, we may experience disequilibrium, i.e., when you learn something new it throws your way of being into disequilibrium. As individuals and as communities, we need to reconcile those changes in order to be able to resolve conflicts. When a youth learns to build a boat (or learns another skill or perspective) it may change their perception of themselves and consequently they need to reconcile that new identity with all the other attendant relations, whether to knowledge, whether it be to others in terms of how they are perceived, and changing or reconciling that change with themselves.

Relational accountability

When entering into the relationships that we've been discussing we should enact relational accountability, which means being accountable to the relationships that we are building. In being accountable, it is important to actively reflect on what is actually being given back into the relationships and how we are being responsible in fulfilling our obligations to the students or the youth within the particular program or community. These are the processes of community engagement that promote an assets-based over a deficits-based approach.

Conclusion

In community boat building, as in other community initiatives, an exploration of power and accessibility are important. The promotion of accessibility through shared communities with dialogic cores, integrative power, reflective equilibrium and relational accountability can facilitate greater movement toward social and intellectual equilibrium.

Acknowledgements

References

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. England: Cambridge University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist, 32*(7), 513-531.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Garfat, T. (2008). Who's looking after whom?. *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice, 21*(1), 63-66.

Ginwright, S., &Cammarota, J. (2002).New terrain in youth development: The promise of a social justice approach. *Crime and Social Justice, 29*(4), 82-95.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. England: Cambridge University Press.

Little, J.N. (2011). Articulating a child and youth care philosophy: Beyond binary constructs. In A. Pence & J. White (Eds.), *Child and Youth Care: Critical Perspectives on Pedagogy, Practice, and Policy* (pp. 3-19). Vancouver: UBC Press.

Richardson, B. (2001).*Working with challenging youth: Lessons learned along the way*. New York: Routledge.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1966). Development of higher mental functions. In A.N. Leontyev, A.R. Luria & A. Smirnov (Eds.), *Psychological Research in the USSR* (pp. 11-45). Moscow, Russia: Progress Publishers.

Wenger, E. (2003). *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. England: Cambridge University Press.

Author

Shane Theunissen. My interest in epistemology and ontology stem from my childhood and education in South Africa and a six-year teaching tenure in an isolated aboriginal community, where I initiated and implemented an Environmental Education program to challenge the acculturating influences of standardized curricula within the community school's classrooms. shane.theunissen@msvu.ca