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Inquiry Learning as Community Practice

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I recently led a discussion group with several undergraduate and graduate students to explore what kind of environments and conditions foster effective inquiry-based learning. During these discussions, the students mapped out their individual approaches to inquiry. How, and in what order, did they think, plan, act, experiment, communicate and reflect during the process of inquiry? The contextual examples varied from experimental field work, to literary scholarship, to learning to dance the merenge. It was not surprising that each person had a distinct strategy or preferential order of execution that helped them to engage effectively and productively. Some students were meticulous in their planning and preliminary background research, whereas others preferred to try something (experiment) first, analyze next, and then go back to revise or tweak their initial approach. What intrigued me was the key element identified by all students which catalyzed their learning during the inquiry process was the opportunity to *share, communicate, and receive feedback* from others. The point at which they opted to do this varied, but they all emphasized the importance and transformational experience of interacting with a broader community of participants. The composition of such a group might range from a handful of peers to a larger diverse community of students, scholars and professionals. What they all had in common was a shared interest or passion in the topic or theme that had brought them together.

The experiences described above are reflective of the scholarly practices we engage in within our academic disciplines. In particular, the opportunity to share and communicate our work with, and receive feedback from a larger community of

peers makes things *matter*. The educator Parker Palmer¹ says knowing and learning are communal acts. Indeed, the graduate students recognized that their learning was cemented during the process of inquiry through opportunities to expand their conversations to a broader audience. Such is the nature of a teaching and learning collaborative, where inquiry is integrated into the community of practice. Learners and teachers can collectively contribute toward the understanding of a problem, a disciplinary topic, or provide multiple perspectives on a particular area. The exchange of ideas can occur beyond the traditional confines of the classroom. In this issue of the *Teaching Exchange*, Josef Mittleman (Engineering) describes the lifelong skills his students develop through deep engagement with a learning community of peers, each of whom bring valuable perspectives and experiences to the venture. The “takeaways” that Professor Mittleman uses to promote reflection and self-awareness for the individual engaged in this community provide a platform for a greater framework for learning. For the teacher, the process provides a transparent map of how the student integrates new approaches to explore problems and use different lenses to assess a given situation. The intellectual exchange, balanced with a respectful self-awareness deepens the impact of lessons learned beyond the classroom. By connecting students’ academic work with other areas of their lives, the “takeaway” helps students see the significance and relevance of these interactions.

Communities of practice can create new learning opportunities in other non-traditional ways. Susan Smulyan (American Civilization) has integrated scholarly practice with a pedagogical tool that continues to grow, and reflects the contribution of new insights from a community of students, historians, teachers and librarians. *Perry Visits Japan: a Visual History* (<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/japan/>) was born out of Professor Smulyan’s desire to share the excitement of wanting to share the scholarship around a single artifact (a scroll) from the John Hay Library with her students. What may have started out as the idea for a course expanded into a teaching and learning commons, where student engagement in the process of inquiry enhanced the understanding of both learners and teachers.

The impact of learning and teaching communities can spread beyond institutional and national boundaries. Massimo Riva’s NEH-funded *Decameron Web* project (http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/dweb.shtml) provides a portal for engagement amongst scholars and learners to collectively explore a process - the reading of a late medieval literary text. This community of practice is described by its creators as follows: “The guiding question of our project is how contemporary informational technology can facilitate, enhance and innovate the complex cognitive and learning activities involved in reading a late medieval

¹ Palmer, Parker J. *To know as we are known* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983)

literary text like Boccaccio's Decameron. We fundamentally believe that the new electronic environment and its tools enable us to revive the humanistic spirit of communal and collaboratively 'playful' learning of which the Decameron itself is the utmost expression.” The collaborative community benefits from a multiplicity of perspectives brought to the project by its constituencies, which create new contexts for learning and teaching.

Communities of practice, as described by the scholar Etienne Wenger², revolve around the process of social learning. Each of the inquiry environments described above foster participation by individuals to engage in, and contribute toward the goals shared by the greater community. Central to the learning experience is the shared communication and the willingness to explore new perspectives. By fostering environments that scaffold the individual students' critical thinking and encourage their participation amongst those with shared interests or goals, we can create significant learning experiences that extend beyond the university.

² Wenger, E. *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)