CHAPTER 16:

FROM N00B TO L33T. HOW COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE PROVIDE A ROUTE INTO *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

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The Zillas continue their exploration of the different areas of Social Constructivism, making lots of interesting discoveries along the way. This time, they've made their way to one of its more commercial areas, a place called Communities of Practice, situated within the wider Landscapes of Practice.

As with their previous sidequest, when they explored the virtual world of The Matrix *as an example of experiential learning, Mike and Markzilla have wandered off into a virtual space, that of the* World of Warcraft. *On hand to rein them in this time is Beckzilla.*

As we saw in Chapter 14, during the longest chapter in *The Lord of the Rings*, participants in the Council of Elrond take on board and make sense of a huge amount of current affairs, recent events, plus ancient and modern history. Perhaps you felt that coming to grips with so much content before lunch without drinking even one cup of coffee was evidence of the preternatural skills of participants in the event. Perhaps you felt Tolkien was pushing the bounds of credibility by piling so much exposition in one place. Yet today, as our fictional worlds expand in size and scope, newcomers to games must come to grips with even richer, more complex settings. If you arrive in the *World of Warcraft*, with its backstory built up over three decades and elaborated by millions of players, what are the chances you will ever understand what is going on? The Zillas reckon that becoming part of a community of practice is key. So, **how do communities of practice provide a route into *World of Warcraft*?**

World of Warcraft

These days, *World of Warcraft* (which has the snappy acronym, WoW) is best known as a massive multi-player online role-playing game (a genre which has the far more cumbersome acronym of MMPORG). It has its origins, though, in a series of real-time strategy (RTS) games of which the first was released in 1994. This drew on the conventions of the multi-user dungeons (MUDs) that had been popular in the mid-Seventies, together with role-playing games (RPGs) such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D), all of which had their roots to some extent in wargames brought to life with a liberal sprinkling of characters and conventions familiar from fantasy fiction and its multiple sources.

The specific mythology of WoW was introduced in 1994 in the *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* RTS. Unlike board games where players take turns, in an RTS all players can be active at once. In this case, players could take on the role of the human inhabitants of Azeroth or the invading orcs (the influence of Tolkien's work is clear to see) from the world of Draenor. They then had to build a settlement, create an army, and defeat the opposing side. In the process, they might collect the gold and wood necessary to make progress, go to the aid of besieged towns, put up some magical buildings, or summon mythical creatures. The game was already developing a complex back story, which was developed further in the sequels, *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness, Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* and *The Frozen Throne* expansion pack.

So, by the time *World of Warcraft* was launched in 2004, new players found themselves in a complex world with well-established mythology, history, locations, allegiances and characters. Not only did they have to get to grips with the relatively new concept of a MMPORG, in which they were playing online with characters controlled by individuals all over the world, they also had to find their place within the gameworld, and get to grips with a complex set of game controls, not to mention wade through a quagmire of acronyms.

In fact, there is so much to come to grips with in WoW that Mikezilla had played for 300 hours before he realised that this game, unlike the others he was used to, didn't simply involve acquiring objects and working hard to level up. The real game, the meta game, was about forming allegiances, players banding together in guilds and taking on missions together that might involve multiple hours of continuous game play. What's more, his original choice of role as a hunter had been great for solo play but limited his options within a guild because other players were looking for tanks to protect them from attack, or healers to bolster spirits and heal the wounded. Highly frustrating to

find these things out after so long! So, how could Mikezilla have made these discoveries earlier on? Perhaps by linking up with a community of practice.

Communities of practice

Back in the 1980s, cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and her doctoral student Etienne Wenger studied how people pick up a practice in areas where training is hands-on and often informal. They looked at various examples of apprenticeship, including meat cutters, naval quartermasters, tailors, midwives, and non-drinking alcoholics. Wenger carried out a detailed study of people working on processing insurance claims. Putting these studies together, they identified the profoundly social and situated nature of learning and, in their 1991 book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, they introduced to a global audience two terms that have been taken up widely – the 'legitimate peripheral participation' of the book title and 'communities of practice'.

Wenger significantly expanded on these ideas in his 1998 book *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Since then, he has carried on this work, married and become a Wenger-Trayner. Together with his wife, Beverly, he has worked on refining and developing the concept, expanding it into landscapes of practice.

Getting back to the basics, though, what are communities of practice? Well, the Wenger-Trayner website defines them as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'.

It's worth unpacking that terminology, because not every group of people is a community, and not every community is a community of practice. Simply putting a group of people together in a classroom or a virtual learning environment doesn't turn them into a community of practice. From an educational perspective, there are lots of ways of grouping people. Some are largely practical: learners are put into a year group, a cohort, or a class. This makes them into a manageable administrative unit. At the other extreme are networks, loose groupings of people who can share skills, knowledge, or useful contacts with others.

Communities are found in lots of places and form for many reasons. As a result, they have multiple definitions. In the past, these definitions usually focused on place, with communities forming around streets or villages, for example. When the Internet emerged there was initially a lot of resistance to the idea that a community could develop online, but that debate died away as social media grew in importance and online communities became increasingly important in people's lives.

One of the crucial elements of a community is that it has criteria, however informal, for membership. Mikezilla's drinking mates, Markzilla's virtual golf group, and Beckzilla's daughter's boyfriend's ex-boss may have absolutely nothing in common but they are, nevertheless, very loosely linked into a network by their connection with those three Zillas. On the other hand, the Zillas can be seen as a community because they have a shared commitment to the *Pedagodzilla* podcast. The membership aspect of community can be elaborated as a sense of belonging, or expressed more negatively as a way of excluding others. A community also has some sense of structure, perhaps containing leaders, founders, or experts. Community members feel they gain something from membership and, over time, are likely to create things together.

In terms of pedagogy, three types of community have received a lot of attention: the communities of learners sometimes known as learning communities, communities of inquiry, and communities of practice. First are the communities of learners/

learning communities. These terms have different, sometimes highly specific, meanings in different contexts. Basically, though, as their names imply, they're communities that have some connection with learning or with education. Typically, they're presented as an improvement on a group set up purely to make administration easy. Classes, year groups, schools, teaching staff can all benefit from becoming a learning community, and there are lots of ideas online about how to shift them in this way.

Communities of inquiry (CoI) are usually seen as a way of learning in online or blended settings. Within them, groups engage in discourse and reflection in order to construct and agree meaning together. They involve three main elements, or types of presence. Social presence is the ability of members to present themselves as real people, even though they may only interact with others online. Cognitive presence is their ability to communicate in order to come to a deeper understanding together. Teaching presence involves an educator designing and facilitating what goes on within the community in order to support the development of this deeper understanding. CoIs are useful when you're running classes online, but less so when you're struggling with the Swamp of Sorrows and attempting to re-imprison a demon for all eternity, or trying to find a way of breaking Marshall Windsor out of his prison in the Blackrock Depths.

None of these types of community would be particularly helpful when you take on the specific challenges associated with a particular practice, whether those involve interpreting an insurance claim form, adding the correct robot voice to an episode of *Pedagodzilla*, or searching underwater for the body of a dwarven soldier. A community of practice helps in those cases because all its members have a connection to that particular practice and can draw upon knowledge, skills, experiences, connections – all sorts of resources that can help to solve a problem, whether it's completely new or one that everyone in the community faces at some time or another.

Communities of practice have three main elements: domain, community and practice. The domain is a shared interest – community members have some commitment to the domain, some competence related to it, and some understanding of what expertise looks like. The community is the grouping within which they interact and learn from each other. That learning is important. People aren't members of a community of practice solely because they sit next to each other, have the same role, or face similar problems. It's interaction and learning that establish their connection. The final element is practice – members must be practitioners, not simply people with a shared interest or theoretical knowledge.

So that's a community of practice. What about legitimate peripheral participation, which sounds a whole lot more complex? Well, you can see a community of practice as concentric circles. There are outer circles of people who have various levels of involvement and an inner circle of people who are the most involved – often the founders or the leaders. Then there are people moving in and out of those circles. Let's concentrate on the ones coming in from the outermost circle and moving towards the centre. They're on an 'inbound trajectory'. If this is a workplace community of practice, like the insurance brokers Wenger first wrote about, people become members by getting a job, turning up to work, getting on okay with the people in the office, and then staying with the organisation for a while.

Whether you're trying to establish or strengthen a community of practice, it's useful to consider the stages by which people get inducted into that community and what helps them do that. Legitimate peripheral participation is part of the process that enables newcomers to become experienced members of the community. It's a first step that enables them to get used to the

language and practices of the group before becoming an active member. Peripheral participation might involve observation to find out what is involved in being a member of a community. For example, an apprentice might be expected to spend some time observing an expert before taking any active part. Or peripheral participation might involve having a very junior role – for example, as a young child growing up aware of the family business but without any formal responsibilities within that business.

The 'legitimate' aspect of the participation has two elements. First, community members have accepted, perhaps through some membership programme or initiation experience, that the participant is a legitimate part of the community. The participant has made the shift from spectator or outsider to someone who has begun the journey towards expertise, and existing members of the community have accepted their right to be there. Second, it's legitimate for the new participant to be contributing nothing, or to be undertaking only small, fringe actions. Community members recognise that newcomers are peripheral, and they're okay with that. Lack of engagement is accepted if you are a peripheral participant. This contrasts with a much more negative attitude towards 'lurkers', who watch but have no intention of contributing, and 'free-loaders' who benefit from the contribution of others while doing little or nothing themselves. Lurkers and free-loaders are unpopular because they are perceived to be a drain on the community, whereas legitimate peripheral participants have indicated that they intend to become contributing members.

Another important element of helping people progress within a community of practice is the knowledge broker (not to be confused with the insurance brokers mentioned above). They have the role of helping to introduce people to the community. They show newcomers the ropes and take them around. This

usually goes beyond a formal induction process. Over time, knowledge brokers introduce the ideas, the tools, the people, and the history of the community. This usually isn't a formal role, but the more people who are willing to act as knowledge brokers, the easier a newcomer will find it to get to grips with the complexity of the community.

Finally, there are boundary objects, the various concepts, pieces of information, and resources that help someone progress through the various levels of participation of the community. Boundary objects help people feel part of the community, participate in it, and do this effectively. Every community of practice will have its own language – terms, acronyms, and abbreviations that are used by members. These can feel alienating at first, but once you have acquired them, by learning what they mean, they become your own special language. And that special language helps you create a coherent feeling of unity within the community.

At the same time, there may be tools, resources, a dress code or uniform, which help to mark out a member of the community. These boundary objects may have subtle differences between them – different colour shades on a jacket, a stripe on a sleeve, a small badge on a hat – which mark out differences in skill and experience in ways that can be understood fully only by community members. Each boundary object you acquire, each nuance you recognise takes you further from being an outsider and closer to the centre of the community.

The answer

So, with their knowledge brokers, boundary objects, and legitimate peripheral participation, just how do communities of practice provide a route into *World of Warcraft*? Let's take the

example of Fictional Fiona. Fiona signs up and logs into *World of Warcraft* for the first time. She has no idea what she is doing – it's different from all the other online games she has tried. But here she is, and she has a pop-up text tutorial pointing her to her first quest. A whole new world for her to discover.

Fiona is a newcomer, a newbie, within the game. But what sort of newbie? Higher-level players make distinctions between these newly arrived players. A newb (pronounced either nyoub or new-b) is someone who has just arrived and is starting to learn. Newbs are aware they don't know what's going on. As a result, they're likely to tread carefully, keeping their ears and eyes open until they learn some of the social rules. If Fiona is a newb, she'll gradually learn some of the cues and the clues, and she'll begin to grasp the social norms. She'll actively try to learn in a positive way.

On the other hand, Fiona might be the sort of person who is unaware of how little she knows. She'll go in, she'll talk across other people, and she'll make glaring errors because she isn't sitting back and trying to learn before doing anything. She's the sort of person who can't even pronounce newb properly. In fact, she's a noob (pronounced as it looks) or n00b. 'N00b' is a term in leetspeak, a modified spelling system developed on the Internet that combines numbers and letters. The term leet (which may also be spelled l33t or 1337) means 'elite', and the l33ts are at the other end of the scale to the n00bs. As one game player said (quoted in Calka, 2006) 'a noob is someone who should know what they're doing, but do not: someone careless, pigheaded, and inattentive, who often causes ruin to others via their actions'.

In terms of a community of practice, a newb is someone engaged in legitimate peripheral participation. They're willing to learn, and they recognise the expertise of others. They're on an inward trajectory and are likely to be able to get some help from more expert players. N00bs, on the other hand, are a drain on the community. 'The "n00b" is the player who is utterly hopeless both in manner and in skill' (Calka 2006). Their very name is an insult and a joke. Part of the problem n00bs have is that they are so unaware of what the WoW environment involves that they may not even be aware there are social norms and social cues. They therefore don't put the time in to learn what these are before really, really winding people up.

Luckily for our demonstration of an inward trajectory, Fictional Fiona is a newb. She's entered the domain of the community of practice (that domain being the *World of Warcraft*) but is not yet a part of the community. Because she's a newb, she appreciates that she's in a peripheral situation. She sees that she's got a lot to learn, but she's determined to learn it. She recognises that she's facing problems. She's got to learn the ropes and get to grips with the available tools, which could be difficult. She wants to be part of the community, which could take time. She's got to make friends, which isn't going to happen immediately. She's got to establish her role in the community and her value to it. All those activities take time in the physical world. They're going to take time in the virtual world too and it's important for Fiona, like any newcomer to a community of practice, to see that's a normal, legitimate peripheral stage.

However, it's difficult at first. Fiona may struggle to make friends. She may struggle to understand what's going on and feel marginalised. If she begins to think, 'This isn't for me. I can't get this. This is too difficult', she's likely to drop out. But she doesn't in this case. She remains as a peripheral member of the community who needs to get to grips with the practice. The practice in WoW isn't quite what it appears on the surface, as Mikezilla finally realised after hundreds of hours of play. On the surface, it seems to be simply about playing the game and levelling up. However, community members have all learned that

practice in *World of Warcraft* is the end-game content. The entire metagame of the game and the community revolves around everything that happens when you have ostensibly finished the game. As far as members are concerned, that's when the game actually starts.

The WoW game is just something you do in order to meet the challenge and be part of the community. Once you realise this, you transition into another part of the community because you've got the key, you've understood that there's a metagame going on. That knowledge is a boundary object, because once you've got that idea in your head, you've transitioned to a different part of the community.

Fictional Fiona begins as a peripheral member of the WoW community of practice, on an inbound trajectory. She may meet a knowledge broker in the form of a guild recruiter. 'We're recruiting for a new guild,' they say, and sign her up. Or perhaps she's gone in with a friend who's been playing for longer. The friend starts to show her the ropes and introduces her to the boundary objects, both objects within the game and game lore. Things like knowledge of the actual game, the metagame that's going on, the goals within that, and the need for Guild cooperation. Things like what your Hearthstone does (it reduces travel time significantly). Things like the realisation that the game isn't really about low-level tasks such as killing and skinning boars, it's about gruelling six-hour raids during which you take on titanic opponents.

So Fiona gets into WoW by following an inbound trajectory within the community of practice, avoiding acting like a n00b, and instead moving from newb to a raid participant. She leaves the periphery and meets knowledge brokers, who introduce her to boundary objects and guide her deeper into the practice, learning as she goes. It's a social participative learning experience. Fictional Fiona advances from her initial 12 hours of play to 312

hours. She joins a 50–100 person guild. She understands the context. She's actively engaged in the practice itself, the end-game content.

During this process, her identity changes because she's connected to other people, learned the language, accessed the boundary objects, and developed her role. She may bring in knowledge and experience from her day-to-day life, or she may decide that her identities in WoW and in the physical world will be completely different. One aspect of communities of practice is that they allow you to develop different identities. Fiona may have a professional role in the physical world as an accountant, a family role as a single mother, a social role as a talented cellist, and a WoW role as a night elf. Each of those identities will be associated with different qualities, different vocabularies, different ways of speaking, different knowledge brokers, and different boundary objects. Even within her WoW guild, her identity will not be the same as it was outside the guild.

At the start, Fictional Fiona knew nothing. She had no idea what she was getting herself into or what lay ahead. If she hadn't engaged with the community of practice, if she'd remained a n00b, she would never have got anywhere. She'd have rubbed other players up the wrong way, interrupted them, disrespected them, and never begun an inbound trajectory. But by engaging as a newb with the community of practice, by paying attention, by recognising she had much to learn, by interacting with and learning from others, she gradually made her way up to l33t status. She'll never know everything about the game – it's too vast, too densely populated for that. But she'll know enough to mark her out as a leader, to be able to assign specialised roles, to maximise efficiency, and to locate resources inside and outside the game world.

Tips for practice

Fictional Fiona's communities of practice covered different aspects of her personal, professional and gaming life because such communities support learning in many situations. However, it's worth noting that the classroom is rarely one of those situations. For one thing, the practice that pupils have in common is being pupils. They're not practising historians, mathematicians, scientists, or linguists. They may be becoming aware that those practices and their associated communities exist, but they haven't committed to any of those domains as a practitioner, and they're unlikely to be interacting with a range of experts in one of those communities on a regular basis. At higher levels of study, the situation may be different, particularly in the case of apprenticeships or courses that involve work experience. A community of practice may also apply at school for sports teams, orchestras, drama groups or brass bands, but in most cases these will be practices situated outside the classroom and the formal timetable.

Outside school, most things we engage with and learn about are practices, so communities of practice are common and largely informal. However, adding some structure and formality may make them more effective ways of learning. Learning to bring up children can be done through an informal community of friends and relations, but regular meet-ups at birthing classes, or parent-and-toddler groups provide an extra layer of value. Discussing plants with neighbours or the people who pass your window box may be useful, but developing your expertise as a member of a gardening club is likely to offer more value.

Wenger (2011) identified five types of value that can be created in a community of practice, and it's worth bearing these in mind when forming or developing a community. Let's return to the example of Fictional Fiona. She gains immediate value from her WoW community of practice when she enjoys community activities, makes a new friend, or spends a happy evening forgetting her miserable day at work. As she engages with the community, she gathers things that are of potential value. These might be artefacts, weapons or potions, perhaps new skills, or a powerful ally. She has no immediate use for any of these things but can see potential uses for them in the future. At some point, she does make use of them and experiences their applied value – she uses her mystical brew to avoid damage and is guided by the wisdom of the jade snake. However, simply applying her skills and resources is not enough. Do they benefit other community members? If so, then they have produced realised value and benefited her guild. Finally, does her activity shift her guild's goal or values? If so, the community of practice has had reframing value that has benefitted all its members.

In less fantastic settings, these five types of value: immediate, potential, applied, realised and reframing are just as important and it is worth considering how each type of value applies within your own community and how it can be applied to learning. In particular, it's important to relate them to the aims of the community, and to have a clear idea of what those aims are. Is the focus on learning as a community, providing peer support for individual members, or collectively developing practice? It's also useful to think about the types of interaction within a community of practice that might be applied. The wide range of possibilities includes increasing the confidence of members, visiting other practitioners or relevant sites, building an argument for change, documenting projects, or problem solving.

Consider the different elements of a community of practice and think about how they apply in your own community. Who are the knowledge brokers and how do people access them? Are there enough of them for a community of your size? Would it

be helpful to train more, or to develop the skills of your existing brokers? What are your boundary objects – how easy is it to recognise and acquire them? Are new members able to adopt an incoming trajectory easily, or do many leave discouraged because they can't find a way in? Reflecting on a community of practice in this way helps to identify steps to improvement that will support more learners.

In particular, it is helpful to think ahead about the key things community members need to know. Enabling people to see barriers or transition points, to recognise what these are and identifying ways to help them through those transitions are all key. Think about how people's identities may change as they become community members, and support that shift. Make explicit the difference between marginality and peripherality. Watching and learning when you join the community are often good things to do – they don't mean you are excluded, they mean you are having the opportunity to prepare for further progress. Legitimate peripheral participation is a key part of that process – you are not expected to jump in and be active immediately. Making explicit to learners that these are the steps that everyone takes when becoming part of a community of practice contextualises the experience for those learners, making it seem a bit less daunting.

Communities of practice are everywhere; we join many of them without thinking. Like so many of the pedagogies in this book and on the podcast, becoming aware of them, seeing what they can offer, where and when they work best, can increase their value to you and all the learners you support.

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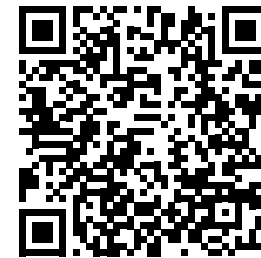
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