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## **OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN GRADUATE EDUCATION IN CROATIA**

### **PREDNOSTI I OGRANIČENJA UVOĐENJA ZAJEDNICA PRAKSE U NASTAVU PREDDIPLOMSKIH STUDIJA U REPUBLICI HRVATSKOJ**

#### **ABSTRACT**

*Communities of practice present a potential alternative teaching approach for entrepreneurial education that has been underappreciated in graduate education. In the first part, the paper introduces communities of practice and cites the existing research. Besides that, it discusses their characteristics and the distinction from other similar structures. Apart from the positive outcomes of implementation of communities of practice in graduate education, this article explores the potential challenges confronting the implementation of communities of practice in graduate education in Croatia. In the discussion section of the paper, the field research investigates students' learning through experience in communities of practice at the Department of Economics in Osijek. Purpose of the field research is to explore the impact of communities of practice on students learning in order to understand the extent to which such activities stimulate entrepreneurial learning. This initial study is qualitative in nature and involves semi-structured interviews with students and student feedback by e-mail as forms of data collection. The collected data is coded by using character counts. In the second phase of coding, the responses are explored in more detail. The paper concludes that social learning is important, and that community of practice approach (COPA) provides enhanced opportunities for learning through action and experience. Engagement in some form of communities of practice improves student confidence. Additionally, it contributes effectively to students' professional development outside of the formal classroom setting. Despite the limitations, communities of practice provide a valuable and useful alternative to more traditional teaching methods which tend to focus on transfer of explicit and codified knowledge and place less emphasis on tacit knowledge which is less teachable and transferrable between teachers and students. Therefore, community of practice approach presents an excellent value to the modern HEI.*

**Key words:** communities of practice, graduate education, competences, alternative teaching tools, experiential learning

#### **SAŽETAK**

*Zajednice prakse predstavljaju alternativni pristup poučavanju u poduzetničkom obrazovanju koji je neopravdano bio zanemarivan na preddiplomskim studijima. U prvom dijelu rada definirane su zajednice prakse kao oblik poučavanja i predstavljena prethodna istraživanja. Rad u nastavku navodi karakteristike zajednica i prakse i elemente koji zajednice prakse razlikuju od ostalih sličnih struktura. Osim pozitivnih ishoda koje donosi implementacija zajednica prakse, rad istražuje moguće izazove s kojima se susreću nastavnici prilikom uvođenja zajednica prakse u diplomsku nastavu na sveučilištima u Republici Hrvatskoj. U diskusiji je predstavljen primjer uvođenja*

*zajednica prakse u nastavu na Ekonomskom fakultetu u Osijeku. Svrha ovog istraživanja je istražiti utjecaj zajednica prakse na učenje studenata kako bi se utvrdio opseg u kojemu takve aktivnosti potiču poduzetničko učenje. Ovo inicijalno istraživanje je kvalitativne prirode, a podatci su prikupljeni metodom polustrukturiranog intervjua i iz komentara studenata poslanih putem elektronske pošte. Sakupljeni podatci kodirani se metodom character count i detaljnije istraženi u drugoj fazi kodiranja. Zaključak istraživanja je da je socijalno učenje važno te da zajednice prakse pružaju izvrsnu mogućnost za učenje kroz rad i iskustvo. Uključivanje u neki oblik zajednica prakse povećava samopouzdanje i sklonost poduzimanju poduzetničkih aktivnosti kod studenata. Usto, takve aktivnosti učinkovito doprinose profesionalnom razvoju studenata izvan formalnog fakultetskog okruženja. Usprkos ograničenjima, zajednice prakse pružaju vrijednu i korisnu alternativu tradicionalnim metodama poučavanja koje se fokusiraju na prenošenje eksplicitnog i kodificiranog znanja uz zanemarivanje tacitnog znanja koje je teško poučavati i prenositi s nastavnika na studente. Zbog toga zajednice prakse predstavljaju veliku vrijednost za moderno sveučilište.*

**Ključne riječi:** zajednice prakse, preddiplomski studij, kompetencije, alternativni načini poučavanja, učenje iz iskustva

## **1. Introduction**

Although all EU countries adopted the idea of teaching and learning entrepreneurship as a way to become more competitive, a survey among higher-education institutions (HEI) in Europe showed that only 48% of HEIs offer entrepreneurial education. This means that approximately only 10 million of 21 million students in Europe have the opportunity to engage in entrepreneurship during their studies. Besides that, at many institutions the subject of entrepreneurship accounts for less than 25% of course curriculum. Additionally, the real impact of this education is rather low. Comparing institution performance with regard to number of courses, Survey of entrepreneurial universities in Europe (2008) showed that the difference between the highest and lowest performing institutions is relatively small, meaning that all HEIs offer similar number of entrepreneurship courses, which have a limited impact on entrepreneurial behavior.

In order to improve their performance, HEIs need to upgrade graduate education teaching methods, stimulate entrepreneurial learning and development of entrepreneurial behavior in their students. One way to achieve that is to supplement curricular activities with communities of practice. Communities of practice engage interested students, ensure networking and contacts with business life in society, incorporate other entrepreneurial activities and encourage members to become more enterprising people. They are crucial for learning from experienced entrepreneurs and successful business people. Communities of practice better prepare students for their professional lives and careers.

Communities of practice, despite being a term of relatively recent invention, have become increasingly utilized as a means of improving performance (Wenger, 2007). A substantial volume of literature has been published that generally communicates positive aspects of communities of practice. Given the growing importance of knowledge management, it is imperative that communities of practice are understood in terms of their limitations, as well. Detailed empirical research in the field has been limited. There is also very little argument about the potential benefits of communities of practice as a teaching tool in graduate education.

This paper attempts to discuss the distinction between communities of practice and other similar structures, examine the positive outcomes of implementation of communities of practice in graduate education, and explore the potential challenges confronting the implementation of communities of

practice in graduate education in Croatia. It also includes an example of communities of practice present at Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek.

## **2. Definition and common characteristics of communities of practice**

The origin of the term communities of practice can be traced to Lave and Wenger (1991) who first used the term to describe situated learning, where learning is not simply the acquisition of propositional knowledge, but occurs through certain forms and types of social co-participation, is contextual and embedded within a social and physical environment. Such learning is highly interactive, with the individual learner not simply accessing a discrete, static body of abstract knowledge. Rather, learning and skill acquisition occur by actually engaging in the desired practice itself, within a participational framework, not an individual mind.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), communities of practice are 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. Besides that, communities of practice are self-forming and self-governing, resistant to supervision, interference and cooptation with the organization, because of their inherently organic and informal nature (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). Communities of practice vary greatly in form and size, yet all possess certain fundamental structural components.

In modern society, communities of practice are frequently used in some form whenever high levels of skills, knowledge and expertise are demanded, throughout a diverse array of disciplines (medicine, law, teaching, professional sports, performing arts, etc.). Participation in communities of practice allows for the management of greater task complexity by confronting the individuals new to a certain community of practice with highly qualified workers, and thus enabling them to use their knowledge, skills and abilities with a high degree of flexibility, independence under certain circumstances. There are many forms of communities of practice, among which in graduate education the following can apply: games, competitions, interest clubs and societies, summer schools, internships, mentoring, students' exchange programs, matchmaking events, projects with local entrepreneurs, student consultancy projects, workshop programs, pre-incubators and other business support programs.

## **3. Distinction of communities of practice from similar structures**

The terms "community" and "practice" refer to a specific type of social structure with a specific intended purpose (Wenger et.al. 2002). Communities of practice go beyond the usual group or team assignments. The primary difference is that communities of practice do not focus on producing a finish product in the most efficient manner. Instead they focus on the process of learning and building the knowledge of all members at both individual and community level.

There are three elements that are crucial in distinguishing a community of practice from other groups and communities. Community of practice 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. Secondly, in pursuing their interest in the 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. Finally, 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 list is not all inclusive, as there are other common characteristics that may develop, evolve or emerge in communities of practice during an extended period of time. Table 1 provides information contrasting communities of practice with other more familiar social structures to describe the relevant dimensions along which it may be differentiated.

It is also observed that the common characteristics, structural components and the distinctions are vital for a community of practice to function effectively and to gain legitimacy, recognition and permanence.

**Table 1 Distinction Between communities of practice and other structures**

Structure	Purpose	Membership	Cohesiveness through	Longevity
Communities of practice	To create, expand and exchange knowledge to develop individual capabilities	Self-selection based on interest and passion for topic	Passion, commitment, cognitive identification with group and its interests, goals and knowledge	Start, evolve and end organically – last as long as topic relevance, value and desire to learn communally last
Project teams	To accomplish predetermined task and objective	Individuals who bear direct responsibility for accomplishing the task	Teams acknowledgement of the project's goals, milestones and progress	Specific- end typically when project is acknowledged as complete
Communities of interests	Informational	Self-selection based on individual interest	Information access, sense of like-mindedness	Start, evolve and end organically
Informal networks	To collect and share common information, to validate relevant people,	Friends, business partners, those who possess and provide relevant information	Mutual needs, relationships, perceived value in belonging and participating	Ambiguous – exist as long as contact between individuals continues

*Source: Wenger et.al., 2002, Kerno, 2008*

#### **4. Opportunities, benefits and challenges of employment of communities of practice in graduate education**

Communities of practice make the share of know-how, the infinite knowledge we all have in our heads (Edmundson, 2001) possible. Additionally, learning occurs in a real-time context. As communities of practice are student led, they provide additional space outside the curriculum for students to take initiative. They have also been suggested as a novel and innovative way of connecting HEIs with its broader environment. As the knowledge economy has increased the complexity of market, learning systems and relationships, it is now possible, even necessary, to conceive of communities of practice that weave broader value webs beyond the formal, rational boundaries of the organization (Wenger et.al., 2002), and increase internal knowledge by reaching outside the formally defined boundaries and thus facilitate the development of shared meaning and identity formation for professionals. Some ranking schemes, particularly, use the number of students' clubs as a way of assessing the quality of a graduate program. At the same time, existence of communities of practice at a HEI is seen as the factor that makes the difference, attracts more students, and therefore more income to the HEI.

Organizations such as communities of practice encourage students to invest their effort where there have limited previous knowledge but where they can learn in a position of relative security (Pittaway et.al., 2011). The collaborative learning environment allows them the opportunity to test their skills without encountering major risks. Some studies (Pittaway et.al., 2011) have shown that because communities of practice provide experiential learning outside the constraints of the curriculum students, but also HEIs, employers, corporate sponsors and alumni can benefit from such experience. Communities of practice provide a foundation for learning from experience, create supportive environment within which individuals can take risks and fail, and thus encourage and inspire entrepreneurial spirit. They aim to enhance entrepreneurial skills and raise awareness, as

well as aspirations and knowledge about entrepreneurial activity (Clark et.al. 2008, Whitehurst et.al., 2008), although the way how they enhance student learning remains unclear.

Despite the potential value and contribution that communities of practice have for students, HEIs and employers, there are some issues and difficulties that impair the introduction, implementation and integration of communities of practice to supplement teaching practices in graduate education that have not yet been given sufficient attention. The implementation of community of practice approach (COPA) is time-consuming both for students and teachers. Therefore, the first challenge confronting communities of practice in graduate education is the availability of time in which students are to engage in the activities to be effective, i.e. to engage in prolonged, sustained discourse. This also includes the time to structure a given period to involve oneself in the activities conducive to the effectiveness of a community of practice, such as regular meetings, allowing for the engagement with others. Prevailing trends, the acceleration of activities and the demand for ever-increased efficiency from the participants indicate that time is likely to become even more constrained and scarce in the future. Furthermore, the curricula are becoming more complex. In addition, more and more students work part-time nowadays, want to pursue other interests and hobbies, and spend time with friend outside their studies. Students in communities of practice are likely to do so at the expense of the effectiveness of communities of practice. On the other hand, there are the teachers who already suffer under excessive work-load.

Another challenge of the implementation of COPA lies in the high number of students, which hinders HEIs from providing the experience of learning in a community of practice for all students, and teachers from evaluating their progress objectively and comprehensively. Apart from that, this approach will bring only limited effects unless academic knowledge based assessment criteria are replaced with competency criteria.

In addition, organizational hierarchies, which, given their ubiquity, durability and verticality are likely to impede efforts for successful communities of practice utilization and integration. The coexistence of communities of practice with the organizational structure of a HEI is particularly problematic because HEIs are hierarchical, and communities of practice are diametrically opposed to organizational hierarchy in many ways. From the characteristics of communities of practice it can be concluded that communities of practice benefit from flatter, horizontal organizations. Besides, they are typically most useful when linking individuals within the organization who are willing to solve commonly faced or experienced problems, exchange ideas, share knowledge directly and refine and spread innovative practices, for example teachers and/or established entrepreneurs, and students. If the majority of individuals within the HEI are more concerned with maintaining the hierarchical ordering than with maximizing performance, even if occasionally the salient rules are breached, the status quo will prevail and communities of practice efforts are not likely to produce any substantive progress or benefit.

Moreover, it has been established (Roberts, 2006) that societies that have strong social structures and a socio-cultural environment valuing community over individuality, may correspondingly have stronger and more effective communities of practice. As Croatia is changing from a society valuing group, community, harmony, collectivism and interconnectedness to the one in favor of self-actualization and individualism, egocentrism and confrontation, we might expect it to become less effective in the use of communities of practice. This continuing erosion of community in favor of individualism in the social context represents an ominous trend for the attempt to capitalize on the community of practice approach in graduate education. Furthermore, there is the issue of creating the atmosphere of security and trust within a community of practice, which can present a challenge in graduate education.

What is more, at present, communities of practice, as a teaching tool in graduate education, are not fully appreciated, because the benefits of their employment are not clearly presented to authorities, management of HEI or teachers. Furthermore, teachers are not encouraged to work together with students on solving practical issues.

### **5. Entrepreneurs without borders as a successful example of community of practice**

Entrepreneurs Without Borders (EWoB) is a non-government student-led organization founded at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2008, USA, with a sister chapter established in 2009 outside of the United States at Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek, Croatia. EWoB offers young people the opportunity to connect with communities around the world, develop business-based projects that solve local economic and social issues and to become a force for the public good, working towards social change, and integrating classroom learning into practice. Entrepreneurs Without Borders is an international organization with the mission to harness diverse skills and resourcefulness of students, and work towards educating communities about entrepreneurship as a way of thinking and living.

As a student organization, EWoB seeks to contribute to the promotion of entrepreneurial spirit, entrepreneurial thinking and action in all social contexts, development of entrepreneurial universities and collaboration with students, organizations and entrepreneurs outside their home institution. Students develop different kinds of projects, such as the celebration of Global Entrepreneurship Week, cooperation with local entrepreneurs through student consultancy projects and business plan competitions, charity events, participation at the European Week of Small and Medium Enterprises and study trips to the USA and within Croatia. The study visits enable students to learn in a different cultural context, share and exchange knowledge and experience, identify opportunities for increasing their entrepreneurial activity, link American and Croatian entrepreneurs, analyze the application of U.S. business models in Croatia, and the Croatian ones in America, benefit communities in need, and ultimately change the human condition in areas of global concern. Through practice and application of consultancy projects students experience how to approach, evaluate and provide viable business solutions to small and medium-sized business owners. The sustainability of these projects is ensured by cooperation with HEI in supporting the development of entrepreneurial activities, and participation with the business community ensuring the implementation of the solutions provided.

EWoB is a great example of a community of practice that supports and complements curricular activities, especially through consultancy projects, for which students are given ECTS points.

### **6. Methodology**

The empirical study sought to explore how engagement in communities of practice can enhance entrepreneurial learning in graduate education. The research was designed to be an initial study. Before detailed surveys or questionnaires are carried out, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of communities of practice and the learning processes involved, and this is the main rationale for the study. It is qualitative in nature and involves two forms of data collection. The first type used is semi-structured, in-depth interviews in which eight students, members of EWOB, were involved. These interviews were aimed at understanding what motivated them to engage in this form of community of practice at the HEI, how it has changed them, and what benefits they have gained. The interviews were coded by using character counts of learning experienced by the students interviewed. The data was analyzed first by exploring the research themes initially, and in greater depth at the second level of coding by developing sub-themes. The second part was e-mail correspondence. This method was selected to gather larger amounts of data in an effective way. Apart from providing basic information, the members of EWOB were asked to

write a couple of sentences on how they participated, what they have learned and how they have changed personally from being involved with EWOB. It was designed to supplement the first form of data collection described above. Ten students responded to the circular e-mail.

## 7. Discussion

The data analyzed in this field research support the view that being involved in communities of practice provides greater opportunities for students to learn by doing through action and subsequent experience (35% of the data set). The interviews have also illustrated that engagement in this community of practice leads to significant shifts in students' self-confidence (67% of the data set).

The more generic evidence supports changes in self-confidence around particular skills and activities, for example: leadership, managing teams, presenting, negotiating and networking and is particularly true for self-confidence in developing and managing new projects. For example:

*I have realized that I have become a more confident, communicative and ambitious person, a person who knows what she wants and pursues that. (Ivana)*

The evidence supports the view that this form of learning can enhance wider enterprise skills which can be applied in multiple contexts. For example:

*EWOB has helped me because others have recognized my leadership qualities and skills. Through various projects and research I have had the opportunity to apply the knowledge I have gained at the university in practical situations. (Zrinka)*

There is less evidence to support the view that learning through EWOB stimulates generation of ideas for starting own business (33% of the data set). One can perhaps argue that students who are engaged in EWOB are self-selected and have already made some commitment to entrepreneurial activity and, therefore, one cannot expect to see much change in their intentions. On the other hand, although, according to this research, EWOB does not encourage students to start their own business, from the interviews it can be concluded that engagement in EWOB can inspire students to become more enterprising persons.

Although it was expected, there was little evidence for the assumption that communities of practice provide opportunities for learning through mistakes (2 per cent of interviewees). It might, however, be the case that students do learn from mistakes, but they did not report this learning in their reflections because either they are unclear that learning has occurred or because they do not regard these aspects of their experience as a "positive" outcome, and therefore disguise any learning that occurs.

There is also evidence showing the importance of social learning, which cannot be overemphasized as the main value of this community of practice. The interviewees often commented on learning through social practice and social engagement, for example when practicing entrepreneurs were invited to give a talk, or while providing opportunities for like-minded students to meet, running mentoring programs, or when students while preparing for competitions developed team-working skills. There are many other aspects that came through in the data, for example: the opportunity to lead others, to work with others on a new project and gain knowledge from experienced entrepreneurs. Organizations such as EWOB, being extra-curricular, have both a social and professional component. Students reported having meetings in cafes, organizing trips together, developing networks and contacts that might help them in their future employment or venture creation.

*My perception about how much a student association can contribute to solving a problem (for example project: Helping children in Africa) has changed dramatically. (Nikolina)*

*EWOB is friendly, relaxed, voluntary, concerned with real life and exploration of ideas is encouraged. (Nkolina)*

*In EWOB we are free and open so we gladly share information and experience and help each other. (Sanja)*

The interviewed students put different emphasis on their motivation to actively participate in EWOB which include: gaining experience and practical knowledge and enhancing transferable skills (11 of 18 students), meeting people and better managing free time (9 of 18 students). A few mentioned helping others, having an opportunity to put idea into practice and personal development.

*There is a big difference between studying and work in EWOB because studying is not as interesting as working in student club. It is more relaxed and fun and we do what we are interested in. (Tina)*

*I have a feeling that I have wasted five years of my life on studying to become nothing more than a clerk in some ministry. I believe that there are very few things that can be learned at lectures on the university and we have to take any opportunity to gain practical knowledge... Theory, unless connected with practice, is useless. Student associations give students opportunity to work on real-life problems. (Matej)*

*For example it is not the same to analyze the future prospects for a company from the USA as an exercise at the lecture and research market potential for a real local company, as we did in EWOB. (Nikolina)*

*We need more practical knowledge. (xyz)*

Interestingly, 3 of 18 students, a motivation, mentioned the desire to gain competitive advantage over other students.

Although the majority of students considers the engagement in such activities a valuable preparation for the labor market (56% of the data set), they do not believe that it directly improves their prospects of employment. This is an interesting outcome as it supports the view of communities of practice as a means to enhance entrepreneurial activity (Sedlan-König, 2011), rather than as a means to directly promote employment.

*My work in EWOB has helped me identify the way in which my future carrier will develop. (Vedrana)*

*Through EWOB I have gained practical experience. I feel prepared for the labor market because I have worked with real life projects and learned to deal with difficult situations. I feel more confident. (Andrea)*

*I feel I am better prepared for the labor market but not yet fully ready to start my own business. Through my engagement in EWOB I understand what I need to do and therefore I have a competitive advantage on the labor market. (Ivana)*

When asked to comment whether HEIs should promote communities of practice as extra-curricular activities among students, 56 % of the interviewed students agreed, although only 4 students, or 22 per cent, believe that engagement in EWOB should be acknowledged by the HEI in the form of additional ECTS points.

*Teachers at the university should be informed about who is a EWOB member, but engagement in EWOB does not need to be acknowledged in the form of additional ECTS points because it would then become an obligation and not student choice/initiative, and it would then not give EWOB students any competitive advantage. (Ivana)*

From the data on learning accumulated, it is evident that students are gaining a range of different outcomes from their involvement in EWOB. These outcomes include: specific skills, context relevant knowledge, knowledge about oneself and change in personal behavior. Students



commented that they have significantly improved their time management (78%), communication skills (44%), team work (39%), and management of ambiguity and uncertainty (16% of interviewees). However, from the data collected it is difficult to precisely define the learning that was accumulated. The reason for that could be because the act of doing leads to specific knowledge that is derived from the context, and is therefore diverse and cannot be predicted as a learning outcome in advance.

## **8. Conclusion**

This article sought to answer the basic question about the opportunities and challenges of communities of practice in graduate education. The research asked additional questions: why communities of practice are attractive to young people, and what learning benefits they provide. In setting to answer these questions the article explored the common characteristics of communities of practice, distinction of communities of practice from similar structures, as well as opportunities, benefits and challenges of employment of communities of practice in graduate education. Also, an example of communities of practice at J.J. Strossmayer University in Osijek was presented. From the empirical data, it is evident that communities of practice provide an important component of graduate education. They do so because they are student-led, allow students to engage in experiential learning, and allow them to learn collaboratively in a supportive environment. When exploring student motivations, a lot of underpinning reasons emerged. These include for example: preparation for future career, enhancing transferable skills, gaining practical experience, as well as personal enjoyment, and development. There is some irony in this conclusion as communities of practice are usually considered primarily to be a means of raising awareness, knowledge and intentions to start a business.

There are some interesting outcomes from this study pertinent to understanding the learning benefits of communities of practice, although there is some variance between interviewees in terms of learning benefits they gain. Inevitably, different individuals have different roles and learn in different ways so it is understandable that they take away different things. Despite individual differences, there is, however, a common thread in the data with regard to the value of communities of practice. Learning by doing, action learning and gaining experience are all seen as the main benefits that students gain. Students often see them as “superior” forms of learning when compared to traditional forms experienced throughout the curriculum. Nevertheless, teachers or high education institutions rarely value communities of practice as beneficial.

Although there are limitations in this article, it has to be acknowledged that communities of practice have real learning benefits for students, as well as for graduate education and that the applicability of the community of practice approach (COPA) is valid. It fills the gap in graduate education as it facilitates the acquisition of transferable skills. In addition, it provides a useful and valuable alternative to more traditional teaching approaches, which tend to focus on explicit and codified knowledge, and place less emphasis on tacit knowledge, which is less teachable, more difficult to observe, and does not travel easily between individuals. There is certain evidence that communities of practice raise self-confidence and provide necessary skills to perform effectively in multiple contexts.

Before drawing wider conclusions, it is important to point out that this study is a small sample which is based on the data from one student club, as the field research gathered data from members of one student club at the HEI as a form of community of practice, and thus it does not represent other forms of communities of practice possible at the HEI. Further research would need to expand on this to explore student motivation. There are some other limitations of this research: it uses self-reported data, it is qualitative, and therefore, has limited validity if applied more generally. Taking into consideration these limitations, the study's main contribution is to initiate a detailed empirical

study on this subject and provide some initial thoughts and conclusions on the value of this form of learning.

Several possible directions and areas for further research into the community of practice approach emerge. The culture of HEIs at the present time, especially the degree of hierarchy, and the challenges this presents to the community of practice approach, as well as the power distance present an avenue that holds potential for scholarly investigation as the understanding of the organizational contexts that are most appropriate for communities of practice mature. Further studies also need to explore student motivations in a more general sense with a larger sample; need to explore different forms of communities of practice more specifically, and should explore organizational practice because, obviously, some communities of practice are more successful in providing learning benefits than others. Also, an independent test of student learning that was gained as a consequence of engagement in communities of practice would enhance further research on this subject.

In conclusion, a community of practice approach (COPA) can provide value to the modern graduate education. However, communities of practice should not be regarded as a magic tool capable of enabling a HEI to disseminate knowledge, or to overcome both organizationally and socially constructed barriers. If the challenges and difficulties explained herein are not appropriately accounted for, communities of practice may fall short of expectations.

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