

KAQF on CCT 693 wikispace

Knowledge Claim:

Learning about the qualities, attributes, and dispositions of people who join or develop support communities can help CCT students plan for their own post-graduation support community.

Actions:

- Confirm through a literature search that there is empirical evidence to back up this claim (or not).
- Follow up with people who have experience in starting and maintaining support communities.
- Use that information to educate oneself and others about the long-term advantage of remaining engaged with others, specifically fellow students and colleagues in CCT.

Questions:

New question

Is there a “profile” that characterizes the qualities, attributes, or dispositions of people who join or develop support communities [and, implicitly, might be useful for planners to know about with a view to recruitment to the program]?

The short answer to this question is NO. All kinds of people join all kinds of groups for all kinds of reasons (see below). In terms of CCT program planners being able to identify likely students to encourage along the path of building a support community, I have come to the conclusion that the onus lies completely with students themselves. That is not to say that community-building should be ignored but rather it is up to students to avail themselves of the opportunities that already exist in this regard.

What does social psychology say about group processes and how that might relate to joining or developing a support community?

There is a considerable body of literature on groups and group processes in social psychology. The insights that might inform who and why people join groups include:

1. *Positive experience with previous groups.* That is, if a CCT student has had previous experience in a formal or informal group – such as a study group, an ad-hoc task force at work, an organization composed of members with whom they share an interest – such as an astronomy club, bunco group, etc., then they are more likely to be receptive to the idea of joining a post-graduate support group.
2. *The group has resources that they seek.* That is, a post-graduate support group would appeal to students who can see some tangible ‘rewards’ to joining it. The rewards could be opportunities to network for future employment, for instance, or the chance to ‘vent’ or exchange ideas.

3. *Acceptance*. The literature says that we are drawn to people who accept and value us as people.
4. *Proximity*. (I didn't make this up!) That is, students may be more inclined to join a post-graduate support group that is convenient and nearby. There is evidence from "mere exposure" literature that says "the more we are exposed to something and the more familiar it is, the more we like that person or entity."¹
5. *Active recruitment*. All other things being equal, being asked to join a post-graduate support group where you already know some of the members is preferable than joining a group "cold."
6. *Similarity*. The literature reports that this factor is the number one reason why people join groups. Similarity can be based on demographics, life cycle, values and attitudes, or on common circumstances – i.e. students who have completed an educational program and who wish to continue to see each other periodically and to keep alive the values, knowledge, and camaraderie they experienced together.

Another aspect that might impact on whether students are inclined to join a post-graduate support group is called "exchange theory." Groups have been theorized to contain both rewards and costs. If the costs (in terms of time, effort, and energy) outweigh the benefits (resources, feedback on one's ideas, friendship) then it is unlikely a student will make the time for a support group.

Cohesion – or esprit de corps, solidarity, etc. can also greatly affect whether a student stays with the group or leaves after a few meetings. In psych-speak, the student's "affective perspective" is engaged when he/she joins a group. Or, other students may value the collective perspective and the idea of being part of something greater than the individuals of which it is composed.

Individual students may have what is called a 'prosocial personality.' Research on traits associated with volunteering and mentoring suggests that some people are drawn to helping others. It seems possible that people with these traits would find support groups an ideal fit for their personality type.

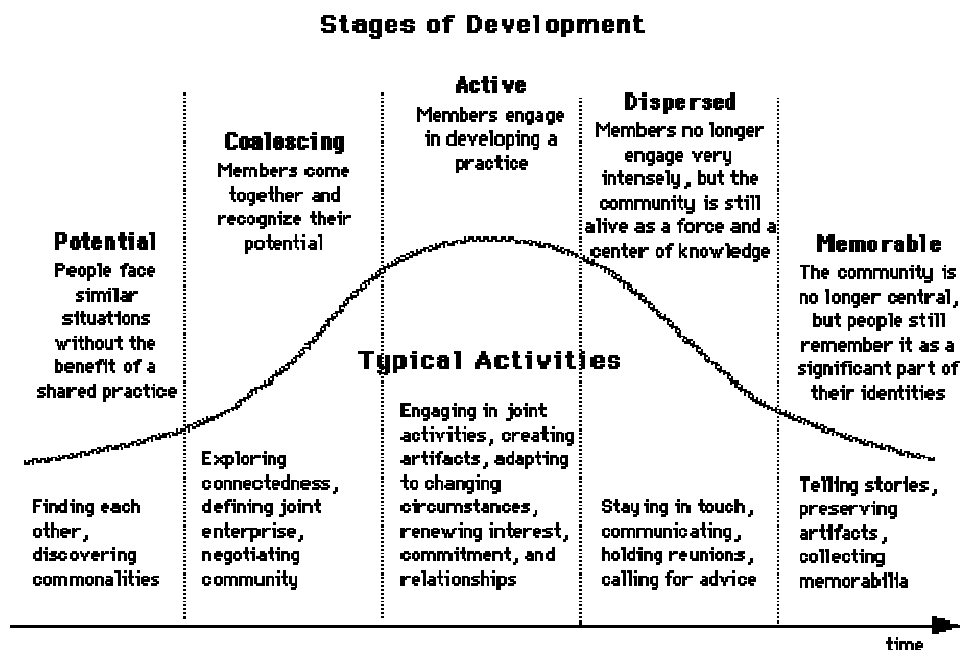
Are there successful groups on which a post-graduation support community can be modeled?

There are probably a number of successful groups on which a post-grad support group could be modeled. In the fields of education and teaching, for instance, I found *Critical Friends Groups* (CFGs). A critical friends group is composed of educators within the same school or among several schools in a district or geographical region that come together to "improve their practice through collaborative learning."² The perceived value in this kind of a group is that it is structured to actually produce learning for the teachers involved, rather than just being get-togethers for mutual venting. A trained facilitator/coach runs the meeting and employs a number of agreed-upon protocols that guide the activities and discussion. The group is called 'critical' because its purpose is share and critique an aspect of a member's practice that he/she has brought to the meeting. A post-grad support group modeled on a CFG, then, would give members opportunities to ask for and receive feedback on some aspect of their work in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

Another model of a group I investigated is the so-called "*community of practice*." While similar in some respects to a CFG, a community of practice is broader in that it can be organization-based as well as school-based. It can be quite formal or fluid and informal - the common factor is that these are people who have a shared practice. "A community of practice is different from a team

in that the shared learning and interest of its members are what keep it together. It is defined by knowledge rather than by task, and exists because participation has value to its members. A community of practice's life cycle is determined by the value it provides to its members, not by an institutional schedule. It does not appear the minute a project is started and does not disappear with the end of a task. It takes a while to come into being and may live long after a project is completed or an official team has disbanded. A community of practice is different from a network in the sense that it is "about" something; it is not just a set of relationships. It has an identity as a community, and thus shapes the identities of its members. A community of practice exists because it produces a shared practice as members engage in a collective process of learning."⁴

A graphic that is helpful in showing this kind of dynamic relationship:



⁴ Wenger, E. (1998). <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>

Significantly, especially in terms of Lee's project, communities of practice are said to depend on internal leadership for their development and nurturance.

Cognitive apprenticeship ⁴ – this is a model that might explain the manner in which CCT could have an impact on its students (and their non-CCT futures). Its five core elements include: 1) modeling, 2) scaffolding, 3) articulation, 4) reflection and 5) exploration. Students who proceed through all five steps during their CCT program are more likely to have a sensibility that appreciates and seeks engagement with others.

Who cares about this kind of knowledge? What purpose can it serve?

As potential graduates of the CCT Program, I think we all care about our non-CCT futures! By reflecting now on the support the program gives, it is more likely that our consciousness will have been raised on how to maintain those feelings of support. You might decide to make the effort to attend a CCT Open House event, or form a study group, or seek out group(s) that may already have formed around CCT.

1. Losh, Susan Carol. (2003). *Guide 5: Attraction to groups*. EDP5285-01. Retrieved on 2 February 2006 from <http://edp5285-01.sp03.fsu.edu/Guide5.html>
2. National School Reform Faculty. McKenzie, M and Carr-Reardon, A. (eds.) (2003). *Frequently asked questions* [about critical friends groups]. Harmony Education Center. Retrieved on 7 February 2006 from <http://www.nsrharmony.org/faq.html>
3. Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: learning as a social system. [Published in *System Thinkers*, June, 1998]. Retrieved on 8 February 2006 from <http://www.co-il.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>
4. 21st Century Learning Initiative. (1998). *A policy paper on the strategic and resource implications of a new model of learning*. Retrieved on 11 February 2006 from <http://www.21learn.org/publ/PP.pdf>

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