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Communities of practice and translation: An introduction

Patrick Cadwell, Dublin City University

Federico M. Federici, University College London

Sharon O'Brien, Dublin City University

ABSTRACT

A community of practice is a concept that can be used to examine how groups of people share knowledge and learn. Researchers in Translation and Interpreting Studies have found value in the concept to study translator and interpreter education and to research knowledge sharing and collaboration among networks of professional translators, fansubbers, translation activists, and public service interpreters and translators. Many of these previous studies examined how translators and interpreters (or those who saw themselves as translators and interpreters) learned by doing and formed communities around a shared practice. Our motivation for this special issue was to explore settings in which individuals who might not identify themselves as translators or interpreters share knowledge about translation or interpreting. We use this introductory article to expand on this motivation, outline fundamental ideas related to communities of practice, summarise each contribution to the issue, and suggest themes and future directions that can be derived from the research presented.

KEYWORDS

Communities of practice, translation, interpreting, themes, research.

1. Motivation for this special issue

Individuals in a community of practice (CoP; plural CoPs) share a common interest, concern, or activity, interact with each other frequently as a result, and develop skills, competences, and knowledge through these interactions; learning happens because of the shared activity, but is not necessarily the reason for the activity (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). The concept has been used as an analytical tool since the 1990s across a variety of disciplines to examine not only the situated learning that occurs through the experience of a particular activity, but also issues relating to participation, social interaction, negotiation, identity, power, and trust (Roberts 2006).

Researchers in Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS) have already found the concept of CoPs to be valuable. The focus has, understandably, been on translator and interpreter education. González-Davies and Enríquez Raído (2016) devoted a widely cited special issue to situated learning in TIS. The issue examined ways in which situated learning approaches can be used to (re)produce authentic, professional contexts in learning settings for translators- and interpreters-in-training and in which students, academic staff, and other professionals or experts can come together in a CoP to learn together by doing (ibid.). In addition, Berthaud and Mason (2018) proposed a CoP of students, professionals, educators, employers, and clients as a model for lifelong learning to respond to the dynamic training demands of the translation industry, while Calvo (2015) examined

the role of work placements as useful CoPs for students of translation at higher education institutions (HEIs). Beyond translator and interpreter education in academic settings, the concept has also been used to research knowledge sharing and collaboration among (frequently online) networks of professional translators, fansubbers, translation activists, or public service interpreters and translators (cf. Risku and Dickinson 2009; Pérez-González 2012; Yu 2017, 2019; Taronna 2016; D'Hayer 2012), to examine learning between interpreters and military personnel in a violent military conflict (Tipton 2011), and to explore ideology, culture, positioning, and discourse among groups of like-minded translators and interpreters (Mason 2014).

Many of these previous studies examined how translators and interpreters (or those who saw themselves as translators and interpreters) learned by doing and formed communities around a shared practice. The studies tended to examine CoPs in academic or professional contexts that are already well known as sites for learning about translation or interpreting. In contrast, our motivation for putting together this special issue was to explore settings in which individuals who might not identify themselves as translators or interpreters share knowledge about translation or interpreting. We aimed at broadening the scope of study in TIS to include any CoP that engages in translation or interpreting and to learn more about people for whom translation or interpreting are important, but not necessarily their main interest or occupation. We hoped that this issue would help to describe some of the diversity of groups currently practising translation and/or interpreting, as well as ways they organise, artefacts they create, and dynamics they experience. Before we summarise the contributions that have helped us to achieve this aim, it would be useful to outline some fundamental ideas about CoPs that will be encountered throughout this issue.

2. Understanding CoPs

A definition that many contributors call on asserts that a CoP is “a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger *et al.* 2002: 4). The foundations for the concept were set in works such as Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). Li *et al.* (2009) caution that, since the concept of CoPs continues to be developed and applied across a number of disciplines for different purposes, it can be useful to focus on key common conceptual characteristics rather than on any one definition. To this end, we suggest that a focus on sharing and interactions within groups can be key to understanding the CoP concept.

2.1. Sharing

Members of a CoP share an interest (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). They care about and value the same issues and problems and share

competences in such a way that it creates a common sense of identity for them (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015; Eckert 2006). Members understand that there is something that connects them all together. This was termed initially their “joint enterprise” (Wenger 1998), but it has now become more common to refer to it as the shared domain that members inhabit (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015; Farnsworth *et al.* 2016). To enhance their knowledge—and improve their shared competences, address their shared issues, or solve their shared problems—members of a CoP learn together, whether intentionally or incidentally. In a CoP, learning is a social act. It is not about the acquisition of individual skills (Risku 2016; Lea 2009). It is about collaborative thinking and participation in shared activities (Lave and Wenger 1991; Pyrko *et al.* 2017).

2.2. Interactions

To collaborate and share within a CoP, members must interact. A group of people that share an interest within a domain but do not interact or maintain relationships together in some way would not constitute a CoP (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015; Farnsworth *et al.* 2016). The focus in a CoP is on knowledge-sharing relationships (Olohan 2020), not just on shared knowledge itself, and the “mutual engagement” of members is required (Wenger 1998). Of particular interest in the study of CoPs are the interactions and relational dynamics between newcomers and established members, between novices and experts, and different levels of individual participation in a CoP (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Li *et al.* 2009; Harris and Shelswell 2009). Trajectories of members from the periphery to the centre of a practice are also commonly explored (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Consalvo *et al.* 2015). Interactions in a CoP can occur in formal or informal ways in the real world, in fully virtual spaces, or in hybrid environments. With the increasing importance of computer-mediated communication in everyday life, interacting online has become an area of increased interest in the study of CoPs (cf. Dubé *et al.* 2006; Rogers 2000; Palloff and Pratt 2007; Daniel *et al.* 2003; Daniel 2014).

2.3. Groups

Clearly, not all groups of people constitute CoPs. For instance, while members of teams or project groups may work collaboratively, they may not share a domain or they may lack sustained mutual engagement (see e.g., Sethi 2017). In fact, when considering CoPs, it may be useful to focus less on the group itself than on the social processes carried out over time by the group in their practice (Farnsworth *et al.* 2016). These social processes can involve and become evident in the group’s stories, language, way of doing things, symbols, or reified artefacts such as shared tools or resources. Wenger (1998) terms this a “shared repertoire” and lists it, along with a joint enterprise/shared domain and mutual engagement, as the defining characteristics of a CoP.

2.4. Other relevant theories

Finally, in order to fully understand CoPs, it is worth remembering that no concept exists in isolation. Other theories of learning and the mind expounded in works such as Bandura (1977), Vygotsky and Cole (1978), Engeström (1987) and Laal and Laal (2012), as well as theories of practice—as comprehensively introduced to translation scholars in Olohan (2020)—provide a useful tapestry of ideas that can inform and support the ideas above.

3. Summary of contributions

The groups of people studied by contributors to this issue care about a range of topics in a range of contexts: the success of Spanish military missions in Afghanistan, French-English bilingual newsgathering and newswriting in Canada, news translation in the Balkans, the quality of clinical reference terminology in Belgium, communication problems in diverse prisons in Spain, development work in Vietnam, and community internationalisation in Japan. At the same time as caring about these topics, the groups studied also practise translation and/or interpreting, and these practices are key to addressing their other concerns. As a result, they maintain relationships with each other to share a broad array of knowledge, including knowledge related to translation or interpreting.

Ruiz Rosendo examines the context of Spanish military officers deployed in Afghanistan and civilian interpreters who worked for them. The study starts from the observation that civilian interpreters working for the military are not hired because they have received training as interpreters, but because they speak the relevant languages. Ruiz Rosendo finds that, while these civilian interpreters were unaware of professional standards and competences in interpreting, they were able to do the job through “learning by doing” within a CoP. This community existed at the intersection of the interpreting and military domains and involved the interpreters and military personnel coming together to solve problems, share ideas, increase their knowledge, especially in relation to cultural issues and military terminology, and to achieve the shared goal of a successful military mission. Ruiz Rosendo deals interestingly in her article with issues of member identity and the sometimes occasional nature of participation in a CoP. She examines ways in which temporary identities within a community can be leveraged to allow members to learn what is needed to achieve a particular goal.

Davier describes fieldwork that she conducted in an Ici Radio-Canada newsroom in Canada’s National Capital Region to examine a CoP of reporters gathering and writing news in a bilingual French-English context. Davier’s study explains that journalists are not typically trained translators and that translation is one of a number of practices that they may carry out

in complex, high-pressure newsgathering and newswriting environments. She places an interesting focus on the risks involved in translation and investigates ways in which news writers and gatherers manage these risks as a CoP. She finds that risk is shared within the CoP and describes in detail the ways in which colleagues rely on each other, turn to one another for help, share knowledge together, and teach and learn together as “newcomers” and “oldcomers” to the bilingual journalistic community at Canada’s public radio broadcaster. Davier also usefully works with the concept of a constellation of practices to describe the intersections of a number of CoPs of French-speaking colleagues, anglophone colleagues at other newsrooms, and members of a wider community of educated French speakers.

Our third submission to the special issue is published in French and continues on the broad theme of groups of people who work together to translate the news. **Tatar Anđelić** examines a CoP of journalists, correspondents, and translators centred on a French-language portal site for news from countries in the Balkans, founded in 1998 and called *Le Courrier des Balkans*. The aim of the founders was to create a non-profit organisation that would present news from independent and democratic local sources in the Balkans to the French-speaking community. The organisation’s online site has grown in the intervening years and is now a significant French-language resource in the region. While originally focused on translation of existing news, *Le Courrier des Balkans* now also adapts news and produces its own content. Translation is conducted by a network of individuals located throughout the region and diaspora beyond the region, who share knowledge and interact together online. The article places a valuable focus on the mechanisms that help this group to function practically, but also discusses the shared ethical and activist perspectives that are evident in the social dynamics of the group. It also explores an interesting relationship between these ethics and the terminological choices that members of the community make when translating texts.

Not all the submissions to this issue examine already fully-formed CoPs. **Wermuth, Walravens, and Lambot** study a potential CoP in-the-making in the context of medical terminology translation. They show how a collaborative project conducted by a team of bilingual medical experts as paid volunteers to translate concepts from an English-language clinical reference terminology used worldwide (SNOMED CT®) into Belgian French could inspire a novel and inclusive CoP-based approach to medical translation and translation training. The authors highlight the significance of domain expertise to the success of such a translation project and explain that best practice involves translations being done not only by translators, but by a multidisciplinary team involving, for example, software developers, health care professionals, translators, reviewers, and terminologists. The materiality of translation practice and learning in this context is evident in the article, and we see how the bilingual medical experts involved in the project collaborated over a made-to-measure web-based translation

platform. This article also usefully addresses characteristics that differentiate CoPs from other similar phenomena, such as task- or project-based collaborative groups.

Valero-Garcés explores the tensions and possibilities of creating a CoP intentionally through a piece of action research. She focuses in her submission on the special context of communication problems in culturally and linguistically diverse Spanish prisons and on the situated nature of learning about translation and interpreting in such a context. Multilingual communication in Spanish prisons generally depends on inmates and staff who are willing, able, and available to provide translation and interpreting services. The CoP formed in the action research, therefore, was made up of foreign bilingual prisoners—who act as an especially critical link for members of the prison population who do not know Spanish (well)—prison staff, university trainers, and the research team. All members of the community collaborated actively in the design and development of the training, and students on the course were observed to continue their learning together and share their knowledge outside of the set class times. In particular, Valero Garcés highlights the principle of reflection in cases of situated learning and argues for the potential of reflection as a way of building learners' confidence through a CoP.

Nguyen describes in his contribution the context of the translation- and terminology-related problems faced by development workers in Vietnam. He examines whether translation can be viewed as a shared practice among development practitioners, translators, NGOs, academics, and other stakeholders there. He finds that trained and professional translators with development experience and bi- and multilingual development professionals are most frequently the stakeholders engaged in translation. Here, as with many articles in the issue, we see the idea of interconnecting practices, specifically how development work, translation, and interpreting intersect. Nguyen reports first on a corpus-based textual analysis that he carried out on development-related specialist communication to provide empirical evidence of problematic translations of development terminology in the Vietnamese-English language pair. He then explains how development is defined, to a large extent, by its practice and how translation, while recognised as a key factor in the success or failure of the practice of development as enacted through its projects, is often overlooked. He helpfully cites cases of recent translation-related collaborations between stakeholders in translation and development in Vietnam—including a seminar, a resource centre, an outreach contest, and a Facebook forum—to argue for the presence of an emergent CoP.

Radicioni and Ruiz Rosendo bring us back to Europe and describe the case of a CoP of cultural mediators working with an NGO helping migrants in healthcare settings in Castel Volturno, Italy. The authors focus on issues of learning and training and use their case study to question traditional forms of vertical learning and highlight examples of situated, horizontal,

learning-by-doing within the CoP under investigation. In the article, Radicioni and Ruiz Rosendo remind us that, despite a well-established preference for trained professional interpreters in medical settings, a large number of interpreted healthcare exchanges are carried out by untrained interpreters/mediators. This was also true of their case study, and they explained that participants were even surprised to learn that there was a range of potential training that they could acquire in interpreting or humanitarian aid. Instead, they solved their learning challenges relating to interpreting and humanitarian provision through shared planning, joint responsibility, and collaborative work within a CoP of cultural mediators, clinical practitioners, and other stakeholders in Castel Volturno.

Forde, Cadwell, and Sasamoto close the issue by reminding readers that, given the importance of online communication in the modern world, CoPs may share and interact in online or hybrid spaces. Their submission addresses the role that digitally mediated communication plays for a CoP of local government workers employed across Japan to internationalise their local areas through translation and interpreting, but also by visiting schools, organising events, or maintaining sister-city relationships. These activities impose a multiplicity of potential roles and demands, which are made more complex by a lack of academic and/or formal training in translation and interpreting. This combination of factors creates shared problems and concerns about the practice of translation and interpreting that members of the community come together online to learn about and resolve. These range from micro-level linguistic issues to macro-level issues such as agency or professionalism. Again, the materiality of learning among members of this community is noticeable, and the article provides some interesting insight into the repertoires of tools, artefacts, and language that can develop in a CoP over time.

4. Emerging themes

The above summary points to a number of general understandings that we can derive from the contributions to this issue. In particular, the centrality of learning to CoPs that care about translation and interpreting and the highly situated materiality of that learning have been reaffirmed. In addition, the practices of translation and interpreting have been shown to interconnect with a broad array of other practices and be issues of concern for groups of people that frequently did not identify themselves either as translators or interpreters. Finally, the significance of terminology and specialised language to groups of people practising translation or interpreting in a broad array of contexts was noticeable.

4.1. Learning

This issue reaffirms, as has already been suggested in other works in TIS (see Section 1), that CoPs provide a useful model to understand how diverse groups of people learn about translation and/or interpreting. The concept

fits well with trends in translator and interpreter education to move away from a vertical, transmission model, to question the primacy of the academic as the holder of expert knowledge, to embrace informal, implicit, and emergent learning, to focus on authentic contexts of learning, and to try to bring theory and practice together. Nevertheless, an area of debate in this issue concerned the extent to which a CoP could be constructed deliberately and by actors external to the community membership. This could have implications for the application of CoPs as a model for learning in cases where the community has not developed organically, such as in some HEI classroom settings. On balance, the data in this issue appear to suggest that, despite spontaneity being an important feature of some CoPs (cf. Hodgkinson and Hodgkinson 2004), a CoP can be an effective setting for learning about translation and interpreting, even when deliberately constructed. In particular, structuring a group's sharing and interactions so that an indigenous purpose (Wenger 1998) can be formed and will be valued, and—in the case of HEIs—involving educators themselves as CoP members appear to be important considerations.

The articles in the issue also showed us the important part played by materials in the way that knowledge was managed and learning took place about translation and interpreting in the communities examined. Some of these materials were relatively traditional linguistic resources, such as glossaries, wordlists, or style guides. Others, though, showed a place for relatively advanced technology use to support translation (and to a lesser extent interpreting) practice among groups of people who would not identify themselves as translators or interpreters. These included specially designed web-based translation platforms and large online forums linked into an ecosystem of communication tools and training resources. Understanding more about the presence and sophistication of materials related to translation and interpreting outside of academia and the professions may be of benefit to educators and professionals alike.

4.2. Interconnecting practices

The practices of translation and interpreting collocated with a number of other practices in diverse ways in the groups studied in this issue. Military staff, journalists, medical professionals, prison inmates, development workers, and local government administrators were all shown to use and value translation and interpreting. Typically, this use was in *ad hoc* situations that could not be planned in advance easily and would not be easy to delimit and, therefore, attribute a cost to. In other words, translation and interpreting needed to be practised in some of these settings in ways that professional translators or interpreters working with a standard contract for services might find difficult to supply, invoice, or be recompensed for appropriately. At the same time, there were settings described in this issue in which professional translators or interpreters engaged in other practices, such as development or government work. In short, looking at how diverse practices interconnected in this issue

suggested that there could be untapped markets for professional translators and interpreters if appropriate mechanisms to supply translation *ad hoc* and at a fair level of reward could be found. In addition, it also indicated other potential career trajectories that graduates of translation and interpreting can undertake and apply their skills to.

These points of reflection bring us to the subject of professionalism in translation and interpreting: a topic that is already and will continue to be hotly debated. Issues such as payment, training, ethical awareness, and collective identification were not clear-cut for the practitioners of translation and interpreting in this issue. It would seem that imposing a professional/non-professional dichotomy in many of the settings described would not be helpful, as many of the contributors to this issue argued. For many of the people in the groups studied, when translation or interpreting were raised as topics for discussion, they engaged with them less in the sense of who they are and more in the sense of what they do. Olohan (2020) reminds us that there can be many different ways to perform a practice at many different levels of competence and dedication, not all of which need to be deemed professional. A focus on the practice of translation and interpreting, rather than their products, processes, or people could pose an interesting way to engage with the study of translation and interpreting in a broad array of contexts and without complex and sometimes unsatisfactory debates about professional status and ethics.

4.3. Terminology

In wanting to learn about groups for whom the production of translations or interpretations is an important but perhaps not mainstream practice, we were also eager to identify any particular translation- or interpreting-related challenges that these groups faced. A final striking pattern across this issue is that terminology and the use of specialised language appears to be one such challenge. Of course, some groups described in the issue were formed specifically to tackle terminology. In other groups where terminology was not a main focus—such as in the military, journalistic or development contexts described—it was, nonetheless, mentioned as a significant problem. To hear that terminology is a challenge for people who, in some cases, practice without training is unsurprising. Translation of terminology proves to be challenging even for highly-trained professionals (cf. Bowker 2015). In fact, we suggest that terminology may be a threshold concept (Meyer and Land 2003) for the subjects of translation and interpreting; we propose that mastering the concept of specialised language and its management is one significant point of entry to understanding translation and interpreting at an advanced level and is worthy of significant focus in the training of practitioners of translation and interpreting at all levels of skill and commitment.

5. Future directions

This special issue has been our attempt to map some of the diversity of practices that are related to the practices of translation and interpreting. We achieved a certain sectorial and geographic spread, but we feel certain that there are many more settings and practices to be examined. In addition to the study of more settings, we second Olohan's (2020: 129) suggestion to perform more fine-grained analysis on the nature of the relationships between diverse practices and translation or interpreting, especially the power dynamics that come into play when these practices meet. In other words, we would like to see a future research agenda on CoPs and translation/interpreting that includes both descriptive and critical pathways.

Beyond future research about CoPs, the contributions to this issue suggest that current training in translation and interpreting offered by HEIs may not be well adapted to satisfying the needs of people practising in the contexts examined. There could be untapped markets for innovative and flexible training services. Based on the findings of the research brought together here, offering micro-credentials or targeted, short-term training courses, especially about threshold concepts to the discipline such as terminology, might be of interest to a diverse range of practitioners of translation and interpreting not necessarily interested in a professional translator or interpreter career.

These are our ideas for conversations that could develop out of the subjects covered in this special issue. We are sure that the articles will stimulate other reflections, and we would be eager to hear from you about them. We hope you enjoy the contributions and find them useful.

Pat, Federico, and Sharon

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Biography

Patrick Cadwell is an Assistant Professor of Translation Studies at the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies in Dublin City University. His current research centres on the impact of translation and interpreting on experiences of crisis, disaster, community, and development. He focuses especially on trust, terminology, and ad-hoc translation.



E-mail: patrick.cadwell@dcu.ie

Federico M. Federici is a Professor of Intercultural Crisis Communication at the Centre for Translation Studies, University College London, UK. His research focuses on translators and interpreters as intercultural mediators and on reception of translated texts. He is involved in projects focusing on translators working in crisis settings and in building translation capacity in non-dominant languages.



E-mail: f.m.federici@ucl.ac.uk

Sharon O'Brien is a Professor of Translation Studies at the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies in Dublin City University. Her research focuses on translation as human-computer interaction and on the role of translation and interpreting in crisis communication.



E-mail: sharon.obrien@dcu.ie