Community of Practice: A narrativized Account of a Full-time Multicultural Worker

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Abstract

Working in an international context requires both resilience and flexibility. Every multicultural worker may face distinctive linguistic and cultural challenges but also have precious learning opportunities. This study was motivated by a desire to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of international employees through the voice of a worker currently engaged in transcultural communication. The research participant is a non-native speaker of English but is highly proficient. The participant obtains high-level tertiary qualifications and has worked professionally in her home country. Sarah is Vietnamese and has been working in Australia for years as a research fellow at a university. Data was collected through an elicited narrative, prompted by open-ended questions, and done in written form. The story was coded for transcultural communication topics, and then selected passages were chosen to showcase intriguing ideas. Findings indicated that one could achieve transcultural success in a multicultural working context by conquering transcultural challenges with huge support from his/her Community of Practice (CoP). It is also suggested that workplace CoPs play an important role in proceeding transcultural communication through social interaction between employees in a global organization, which results in transcultural successes.

Keywords: Community of Practice, transcultural communication, transcultural challenges, transcultural successes, narrative inquiry

Introduction

People are probably going to live and work in multicultural settings in this day and age of globalization and widespread migration. Multicultural workers have chances for both personal and professional growth despite obstacles to cross-cultural communication (Gertsen & Soderberg, 2011; Jackson, 2016). As a result, numerous research has been conducted to examine transcultural difficulties in diverse working situations in order to achieve transcultural triumphs (Fountain, 1991; Lillie, Penny, Pat, Julie, & Antonella, 2015; Voigt & Reuter, 2009). Community of Practice (CoP) is thought to aid an overseas worker in achieving these objectives by giving him "access" to the social customs of their target speech community and aiding him in the acculturation process. In reality, CoP may make it simple for international workers to obtain enough learning resources, which makes them feel empowered and fit in well with their host society (Jackson, 2016).

Thus, this paper examines a Vietnamese worker from a diverse background who has spent years working in Australia. The study's second goal is to shed light on the experiences of the worker involved in transcultural communication at the participant's workplace through the analysis of her CoP.

Literature review

Community of Practice

A group with similar interests or occupations naturally forms a community of practice (CoP), according to Lave and Wenger (1991). Members of CoPs share knowledge and experiences in order to grow personally and professionally by learning from one another (Lave &Wenger, 1991). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), a CoP is made up of three essential components: mutual member participation, a jointly negotiated enterprise, and a shared repertory of "words, ways of doing things, gestures, symbols, actions, concepts, routines, and tools" (Wenger, 1998, p.83).

The idea that those gathered in CoP also share "practices, ways of speech, attitudes, and values" was greatly expounded upon by Eckert (2000). The three common traits of a CoP, according to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), are a CoP's domain, community, and practice. Domain specifically refers to the interest that is used to provide a common ground for members to forge their sense of group identity. A community is described as a group of people that interact, learn, and form relationships with one another in order to establish commitment and membership. The identity of an individual is partially built by his or her participation in a social context since the learning process is seen through the lens of social participation. Last but not least, practice describes the shared and acquired competencies and common repertories among members.

In a way, the CoP analysis can show how the emergence of a hybrid identity from the worker's home and host cultures has changed their identity as multicultural worker**s**, which is important for success in cross-cultural communication. Thus, the role of CoP at the workplace is well defined since it offers the interpretive support required to make sense of its legacy. A CoP is a fundamental requirement for the existence of knowledge shared among colleagues. As a result, an epistemological premise of learning is involved in the cultural practice in which any information is present. Learning opportunities are defined by this practice's social structure, power dynamics, and prerequisites for legitimacy (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Especially in the age of globalization, CoP is thought to be a catalyst for knowledge development, and CoP can impede information sharing across boundaries (Matsuo & Aihara, 2022).

Methods

A qualitative method of discourse analysis based on learning about people's lived experiences is known as narrative inquiry. According to Connelly and Cladinin (2006), the gathered narratives are interpreted in a way that records one's own experiences.

The participant is a Vietnamese and non-native speaker of English with highly competent proficiency. Sarah is Vietnamese and turning 34 this year. She was born and raised in Hanoi. After finishing her Bachelor of Arts in English language teacher education, she began her career as an English lecturer at a university in Hanoi (she is still currently employed here). Then, she came to Australia to pursue her Master's in TESOL, which she finished in 2016. She is currently a final-year Ph.D. candidate at an Australian university.

Sarah has rich work experience in teaching and tutoring the English language. She has been a volunteer English teacher for Drop-in Pronunciation (DiP) Program at the City of Darebin Intercultural Center, an academic English advisor, and a peer learning advisor at an Australian university in Melbourne, Victoria.

Data was collected through an elicited narrative, prompted by open-ended questions, and done in written form in English. Since the participant and the author of the paper live in different countries, the participant wished to write down her answer in her free time. In fact, it is crucial to give the participant the confidence she needs to open up and share her tale. The narrative was finally coded for topics pertaining to transcultural dialogue, after which portions were chosen to highlight noteworthy ideas.

Findings and Discussion

After analyzing the participant's data, the information is coded and put in the themes following her life experiences. Sarah's story first begins with the impact of language norms and effects. Then, her transcultural struggles and achievements are critically analyzed. Her professional CoP is finally reviewed and discussed.

Language norms and effect

English is the official language at Sarah's workplace. She uses it to interact with colleagues and managers or do work papers. However, there are no 'fixed' language rules at work as Australia is such a multicultural country, and in most of the related academic workplaces, Australian people value diversity, including linguistic diversity. However, some 'strict requirements' still apply to certain academic situations.

> *….we were not required to follow any particular forms of English (i.e., American, Australian English). As long as it is academic English, it is acceptable. But I do know that some are quite strict about the use of "ize" "ise" in students' assignments. Students are required to use Australian English (for example, they must use "-ise" instead of "-ize", or "-our" rather than "-or", etc. in their assignments rather than American English.)*

Since Sarah works as a volunteer teacher at a multicultural center, she could even use Vietnamese when interacting with Vietnamese refugee seniors. And this was totally accepted by her team members as the use of Vietnamese was very appropriate and useful in this case.

Interestingly, the use of "native" language, such as slang at the Australian workplace, is very much challenging for Sarah to comprehend the cultural references in slang and use them in efficient communication. In fact, one of the biggest language problems she met is understanding Australian slang used by her Australian colleagues though Sarah is well-trained with English

speaking skills at her workplace in Vietnam since one of the primary objectives of most Vietnamese institutions' English language curricula is English speaking ability (Su, Cao, Le, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2021).

> *I noticed that in PLA team, most of them were local Australians (20 or more staff), and there was only 4 staff that had an international background. Sometimes, when we did not have consultations with students, we normally had chitchats. There were many times that I couldn't follow the conversation, not because I did not understand the language but because the topics or slangs they were talking about were unfamiliar. I might have had the language but lacked the cultural knowledge to decode and join the conversations…*

In addition, language significantly affects her work performance even though she is an English lecturer and highly competent in English.

> *I worked as a peer learning advisor (PLA). As part of the job, I was required to read students' assignments to see if they were on the right track with their work. Students came from different backgrounds and did different majors. I sometimes did not feel confident reading students' assignments from majors completely different from mine, such as law or nursing. Even though the job only required me to look at the big picture or the general structure of the assignments, being unable to fully understand the content due to the language barriers still somehow negatively impacted how I performed my role at work…*

Divergence to Transcultural challenges

Sarah has met cultural differences but not really cultural challenges as she claimed due to the differences between her Vietnamese cultural background and Australian cultural norms at her workplace. In reality, Australian society is individualism-oriented and more indulged than Vietnamese society, which is collectivistic based on Hofstede's cultural dimension model (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). As can be seen from the meanings of Hofstede's cultural indices, Australians are tolerant of individual sentiments and wishes, whereas Vietnamese tend to be reticent, collectivist-oriented, and put their emotion under control.

One example of cultural differences is students' self-discipline at school. In Vietnam, teachers are quite strict about what students are allowed to do or not to do at school. For instance, inappropriate learning postures, eating and drinking misconduct, or frequent lateness can be considered school rule violations (Nguyen, 2021) because those misconducts are believed to negatively impact other peers, while Australian schools seem more tolerant and encourage students to express themselves freely. Besides, how students communicate with teachers must be the most formal to show their respect to those who teach them since teachers are considered' the second parents' in Vietnamese culture. That is why Sarah feels quite 'strange' in the way Australian professors interact with their students. Interestingly, she has a good outlook despite those "differences."

> *What impressed me the most about how Australians communicate at work is their openness in sharing their points of view, either to their colleagues or to their supervisors or boss. In Vietnam, it is not that often that staff can be that direct and open in expressing their ideas or viewpoints to their supervisors or managers, as it may be seen as a sign of disrespect. But in Australia, the supervisors or managers do not think themselves in any*

way superior to their staff and really encourage you to offer alternative ideas. One supervisor that I had a chance to work with even reiterated multiple times that she also needed to learn from us. This is something very strange to me at first. But I think this kind of openness and equality (if I can call it that way) is important and has made my working experience in Australia pleasant.

However, sometimes Sarah felt confused and questioned while communicating with her Australian colleagues because she had no idea what they meant when they were too 'indirect'.

…sometimes I was confused and questioned because I did not know whether it was what they meant, for they just tried to be nice and tried not to make you feel bad. In Vietnam, it seems that people are more "real" and more direct, telling you what you have done ineffectively and what else you need to do to improve your work efficiency. It is not the case in Australia. I have never been told what to do to improve my work. Everything has two sides. Sometimes I wish "harsher," and more direct comments would be good.

Furthermore, she does not wish to change her accent when speaking English because she defines it as her own identity though sometimes it may cause her difficulties at work.

…my accent seemed to be assimilated into the Australian English accent… I am not inclined to force myself to imitate any (standard) accents…You have your own personal and national identity, which might have been reflected through your use of language…

Obviously, she employed the Divergence strategy for her communicative behaviors as she chose not to adopt the practice to fit in (Giles, 1973). In addition, in the openness and equality Sarah appreciates in the Australian culture, she wished to be more 'direct' or 'real' in particular cases in order to get things done more effectively, but it seems she could not get her expectations met as she may have in Vietnamese working contexts. In addition, the Vietnamese accent in speaking English is seen as Sarah's pride.

Convergence for Transcultural successes

Sarah adjusted herself to being part of her organization. More specifically, she tried to overcome work challenges by studying Australian culture. Sarah compiled a necessity to improve her cultural knowledge to understand slang to join chitchats or conversations among her Australian colleagues and students.

First, I started to invest in learning about Australian cultures a bit more…For example, I remember it was not until the fourth year of my sojourn in Australia that I knew Melbourne Cup is a horse racing competition. I heard of Melbourne Cup over and over again over the years, I did not make any attempt to do any Google search to find out what it is. But since I worked in a team with many Australians, I became more attentive to these local cultural things. Whenever I heard new things, I either asked them for further details or took note of the words and did some study about them later on.

Her efforts also eliminated 'unease' in workplace situations caused by different cultural practices.

Second, I sometimes tried to lead the conversation but initiated the topic of the conversation. I normally talked about things that I know well or things that might be of interest to others, something that is Vietnamese related, etc…

I always prepared well before any meetings. When I worked as a volunteer teacher, we sometimes had staff meetings; before meetings, I often read the meeting agenda, taking notes on the points that I wanted to make, thinking of the language to use…

Be less direct in giving comments. This applies to both the communication with my colleagues and also the students that I worked with…

The aforementioned instances demonstrate how Sarah employed the convergence method to close communication gaps and social and cultural divides with her coworkers to blend in (Gasiorek, Giles, & Soliz, 2014). As a result of her adjustment efforts, which were commended by her coworkers and strengthened by shared understandings, she was able to achieve transcultural success.

I *pushed myself to join more social events held by the team. This did make positive changes in my level of confidence and how I performed and communicated with others at work... These social events were great opportunities to build up good and close relationships with other colleagues and to break up the invisible border that I built between myself and my colleagues…Thus, I feel more welcomed…*

Professional CoP

Being a participant

Being aware of the disadvantages of language incapacity and foreign background, she was motivated by more learning opportunities and personal development to perform better at work. Thus, she experienced low work morale when her expectations were not fulfilled.

…I was quite ignorant about Australian things that happened around me, just finish work and go home…

Furthermore, a strong desire to be seen as a member of her organization sometimes affected her feelings, resulting in her poor networking at work.

… I feel like an outsider because I could not follow their conversations … their lifestyle…

Being a core member

Sarah has benefited from being a core member of her community. Firstly, due to the acceptance of cultural diversity at Sarah's institution, she was facilitated in her acculturation and assisted in improving her weakest point – her language capacity.

…In addition, there was always a peer learning leader (PLL) to seek help. They were always very supportive. If I felt it hard to conduct and consult, I could always refer the student to the PLL or other PLAs with expertise in that field. So, I think I relied on the other team members in these cases.

The accommodating attitudes of her coworkers and manager also let her feel like a member of the business. They specifically showed her that they cared for her and welcomed her. She

noticed good alterations in her work attitude over time. That emphasizes how there is a big difference between being a participant and becoming a core member. Therefore, there is a huge difference in the way Sarah defined her Australian colleagues, which is 'we' now but not 'they like before.

> …*We were suggested to use the sandwich feedback method, with the three-step procedure to help us with providing feedback, which makes getting things done much more easily…*

And Sarah even accepted to adjust her accent to be more easily understood in communication unlike resisting that like before.

> *…when you are part of a workplace community, sounding more like the majority might be a plus to make you feel at ease.*

As a result, she grew a strong commitment and attachment to the aspects of work.

> *…For me, after an end-of-the-year hang out with the team, I felt like I became a different person and felt more comfortable talking to other team members…I felt I am like one of them. We are making an effort every day for better work.*

An outstanding example of the change in her mindset toward the workplace was self-correcting misunderstandings in the past.

> …*And over time, I gradually reset my mindset, reminding myself that Australians are very friendly and very willing to talk and small talk serves an important purpose - it helps build deeper relationships with other people.*

She enthusiastically participated in CoP, including small talks. Her acceptance of this signifies her membership in this CoP for professionals (Holmes & Woodhams, 2013).

> *…It was getting better and better. I sometimes start a small talk by giving my colleagues compliments /ˈkɒmplɪmənt/, things like, "I was really impressed with your ideas on this and that …*

> *These compliments do not need to be work-related all the time. They can be something less formal like "I like your jacket. Where did you get it?" I believe this will make your colleagues feel closer to you because you are asking something or talking about something that matters to them. And you can build up a good relationships with others at the workplace.*

Notably, Sarah now confessed her affection for her university and people like her at work as well.

> *I love this workplace…I do not know what they really think about me, but I feel they like me at work.*

That the love she has for her work has paid off illuminates how the role of CoP at the workplace helps its workers develop both personally and professionally to succeed in an international working context. Additionally, workplace CoPs are essential for advancing transcultural communication through fostering social interactions among employees. One may deliberately

modify themselves in order to become a "core member" position within a company when they are completely content and motivated at work.

Conclusion

Findings from Sarah's narrative show that her workplace has worked actively to establish a CoP where transcultural learning can occur through socialization and where cultural diversity is appreciated. It is important to note that not all transcultural success tales involve an easy transition from the start to the finish of the acculturation process. Sarah's experience demonstrates how a multicultural worker with a foreign background may overcome transcultural problems with her own efforts and a lot of assistance from others to succeed in an international working situation.

Additionally, narrative inquiry has shown to be a successful method for exploring people's life stories and giving them meaning. In fact, Sarah's story can reveal the nature and significance of multicultural working experiences and highlight a variety of variables that affect how well people function in multicultural settings.

For more insightful suggestions based on the real-world experiences of global employees, additional and similar studies are welcomed. The possibilities of participant effects, such as participant personality (Sarah perceives herself as an introvert), and how participants present their data, should be taken into consideration by researchers. As participants might not remember and reveal their tales accurately, Jackson (2016) asserts that participants' disclosure decisions and memory effects should also be taken into consideration. Besides, the conventional knowledge of CoPs is being challenged by current discussions on the future of work and new methodological advancements, which also present research opportunities and novel conceptual fusions. It is also highlighted that new theories and conceptualizations may emerge through the interaction of the lenses, the CoP theory, and related literature (Nicolini, Pyrko, Omidvar, & Spanellis, 2022).

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Biodata

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