A study on mutual engagement in communities of practice

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Abstract

The Morakot flood disaster was caused by Typhoon Morakot, which was one of the catastrophic typhoons that have influenced Taiwan in recorded history. The government was criticized for their slow response to the disaster. It was not the government rescue crew but the voluntary rescue teams that offered the most important helping hand to the victims to retrieve thousands of trapped citizens from buried villages. Why can voluntary rescue teams be so professional and efficient? The answer is: they are a kind of Community of Practice (CoP). Although Wenger (1998) proposed 3 elements of forming a CoP, a deep analysis into the 3 elements is lacking, to say nothing of discussing “mutual engagement”, one of the 3 elements, from the perspective of NGOs. In order to explore the members’ mutual engagement in rescue CoPs, the researchers used the data derived from rescue teams in Taiwan to understand two questions: A) Why did the rescue team members initially participate in the mutual engagement? B) Why did the members continue to participate in the mutual engagement? The semi-structured interview method was employed to collect data, while the theoretical framework of CoPs was applied to structure the analysis. The main opinions adopted in this study were from 20 interviewees, who belonged to 6 of the visited rescue teams. This study concludes with some factors in people’s initial participation in mutual engagement, and with some factors relating to members’ continuing motivation to participate. Mutual engagement is triggered by varied social learning processes, so the elements interact and are intertwined with each other.

1. Introduction

The Morakot flood disaster was caused by Typhoon Morakot, which was one of the catastrophic typhoons that have influenced Taiwan in recorded history. Because of the disaster, there were 461 people dead and 192 missing. The government was criticized for their slow response to the disaster. It was not the government rescue crew but the voluntary rescue teams that offered the most important helping hand to the victims to retrieve thousands of trapped citizens from buried villages. Why can voluntary rescue teams be so professional and efficient? The answer is: they are a kind of Community of Practice (CoP).

Although the concept of CoPs has been highlighted in many fields, the majority of the studies are about knowledge sharing and the application of CoPs. For example, in medical related applications, some patients have...
organized communities of practice to discuss health issues (Watson-Gegeo, 2005). Mørk, Hoholm, Ellingsen, Edwin & Aanestad (2010) have studied a plan of medical innovation in Norway. They found some conflicts and political issues derived from the process of forming a CoP. In education related applications, Moule (2006) has explored CoPs for distance learning, while Green (2005) studied a CoP involved in qualitative research in higher education. In a business related application, Probst & Borzillo (2008) highlighted the importance of building a knowledge database by way of CoPs, while Amin & Roberts (2008) analyzed CoPs for traders in a stock market. From 2005 to 2009, the academic focus has been mainly on applications in various fields. Although Wenger’s (1998) 3 elements of practice have been referred to in some studies, a deep analysis of the 3 elements is lacking. From 2009 to 2011, topics such as power and conflict issues within a CoP have been discussed (Hong & K.H.O., 2009; Venters & Wood, 2007), while some imperfections in CoPs have also been identified and suggestions were given (Gau, 2011). None of these studies was about voluntary rescue teams. Few articles discussed the 3 elements suggested by Wenger (1998), to say nothing of deconstructing or analyzing the elements in depth. In order to fill the academic gap, the focus of this research is on one of the 3 elements, mutual engagement, to see why mutual engagement is formed in rescue CoPs.

According to Wenger (1998), people who want to participate in CoPs get ready to share their knowledge, sharpen their expertise, build up interpersonal networks and pursue their interest. These interactions cannot be completed by the individual him or herself. They need other people to offer responses, mutually to continue the engagement to link different enterprises and to build up shared repertoires (Hara, 2009). Therefore, mutual engagement means not merely participating in activities, but also triggering continuing opportunities for further interactions (Guldberg & Mackness, 2009). The initial motivation to participate is crucial, while the continuing motivation to remain involved is even more important. In order to explore the members’ motivation to participate in mutual engagement in rescue CoPs, the researcher tried to use the data derived from rescue teams in Taiwan to identify the initial and continuing motivations for participation. The researcher aims to understand the following questions:

(1) Why did the rescue team members initially participate in the mutual engagement?
(2) Why did the members continue to participate in the mutual engagement?

2. Research method

The focus of this research, in terms of learning, is on exploring the keys to triggering rescue team members’ initial and continued motivations to participate in daily rescue interactions. The semi-structured interview method was employed to collect data, while the theoretical framework of CoPs was applied to structure the analysis. In order to find appropriate rescue CoPs to study, the researchers visited all the 16 voluntary rescue teams which were recognized by the government in the Morakot flood disaster. The main opinions adopted in this study were from 20 interviewees, who belonged to 6 of the visited rescue teams. The majority of the interviewees are male, which echoes the population structure of rescue teams. For example, team D has 42 members only 3 of whom are female (about 7%) making the organization a male-dominated organization. Each interview lasted about 2-3 hours in total.

In order to understand the rescue team members’ interactions with their leaders, their colleagues and the environment, the researchers selected 3 positions of people in each rescue CoP, including the leaders, senior members and junior members.

The research schedule was structured by Wenger’s (1998) description of the 3 elements. The researchers adjusted the questions depending on the situation. In interviewing the leaders, some questions, such as “how do you establish the organizational culture?” or “please tell us your experience about helping team members”, were raised. For senior and junior members, some questions referring to “mutual engagement” or “making comparisons with others” were asked. Common questions such as their motivation to participate in the rescue team were also asked to obtain a general view on their participation motivation. Tape-recording and transcription techniques were employed so that the raw data could be labeled and well categorized according to the theoretical framework. The story lines were finally developed through repeated checking between the labels, the theories and the raw data we obtained from the fieldwork.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. The rescue teams in Taiwan
In rescue teams, members have developed varied and sound network systems to receive emergency calls and to respond to calls for help. All the rescue teams we visited have experience of assisting firefighters and had at some point been called out on hazardous missions to serious accidents such as car accidents, fire, flood, debris flow, earthquakes, and so on.

In order to rescue victims safely and successfully deal with hazardous missions, rescue team members continue to receive training, equipping them with professional knowledge and sharpening rescue skills. There are 3 sorts of learning programs arranged in their daily training activities, regular formal training, practical training and skill discussions (Mr. E). Practical experience is strongly highlighted in these training activities. According to Mr. F, “…the most important thing is practice. Practice makes perfect. We learn from each other. Practice again and again…if anything is confused, we will teach each other”. When team members learn a new skill, those who know will teach those who don’t. When a brand new skill is introduced, they will discuss it with each other and put it into practice to grasp the technique completely (Mr. S). This reflects what Wenger (1998) refers to as “mutual engagement”. Engaging in learning and practice mutually is a key to digesting the training courses they receive. The voluntary rescue team members on the one hand devote themselves to relief work to fulfill their aspiration of social service, while on the other hand they sharpen their professional skills to satisfy their desire to pursue knowledge.

This sort of voluntary organization is very different from general CoPs, even though it can still be viewed as one of them. Members join the team voluntarily, pay the membership fees and spend their time and money on training programs (Mr. E). The work can be full-time or part-time (Mr. S). According to our interviews, most of the team members are part-time members and have their own family and business. Although they are part-time volunteers, they view the job as a 24-hour service (Mr. E). When an emergency call is received, some will put their work aside to join the rescue task immediately, while others may call for help to find someone else available to help in the situation. Because the job is strongly associated with people’s life, the rescue team members give top priority to the rescue activities and are even willing to contribute their own personal resources to the activities. The involvement is very different from those in general CoPs and is so much more than just sponsoring activities or learning particular professional knowledge.

3.2. Initial motivations to participate

6 keys have been identified in this study to explain why the voluntary rescuers initially participate in the rescue teams. The 6 keys are as follows: being concerned about local affairs, having shared interests or attention, paying back what has been given by society, attractive atmosphere of interaction, social exchange, making it easy to be a rescue professional and making training friendly.

The cause of a rescue team cannot be ignored when one’s initial reason for participation is discussed. Wenger (1998) suggests that a CoP is normally formed by participants’ shared interests. This echoes what we have found in this study. Some rescue teams were built by groups of people who were interested in radio. Because of mutual engagement, members changed their interests from playing with radio to studying rescue techniques. In other words, the initial interest triggers members’ mutual engagement, while the mutual engagement influences the content of the interest. The findings also identified some other motivations derived from people’s self will. Some interviewees in this study show their strong desire to save lives, to serve the public and to worry about the local authority’s slow action and inability to respond to disasters. Some highlight the concept of giving and receiving and showing their gratitude to society. Compared with other initial motivations in this study, the above 3 elements, which are derived from self will, can be viewed as internal elements of initial motivation.

Initial motivation to participate is also affected by external elements. Some voluntary rescuers were attracted by the friendly atmosphere of interaction, while some participate in the group in order to learn rescue skills. The attractive atmosphere of interaction and social exchange seem to have explained why the team members initially joined the group. Additionally, because rescue skill is, in the general view, hard to learn, some rescue teams try to break the barriers to participation to enable people to feel comfortable accessing the activity. Lowering the threshold (making it easy to be a member and making training friendly) enables some who are of peripheral status to feel less pressure to join the mutual engagement.
3.3. Continuing motivations to participate

4 extra keys about members’ long-term engagement were also identified to explain why members keep participating in activities and why the 6 initial keys may keep developing. The 4 keys are the sense of doing a meaningful thing, the identity of belonging, the effect of shared habit, and the sense of achievement.

Most interviewees believe that they are doing a meaningful job. Because they value what they have done, the sense of meaning and purpose groups like-minded people together to form shared practice to continue the 6 initial motivations for participation.

The identity of belonging enables the rescue teams to create a family-like atmosphere to foster positive interactions. Because the identity has been formed, the individuals believe that they are insiders and will be pleased to share their personal expertise with each other without worrying about being cheated. Additionally, some rescue teams try to involve members’ families in their training activities and hope the families have a consensus view on the meaningful job. When both the individual and his or her family agree with the voluntary job, the identity of belonging can gradually be formed to enable the individual to be involved in learning and daily sense-making activities (Wenger, 1998).

A sense of achievement may arise when the individual is intensively involved in gaining knowledge and engages in meaningful activities. The sense of achievement enables members to strengthen their original belief in participation. For example, those who are interested in local affairs are more enthusiastic than before because they have gained achievement during the process of helping others (Mr. I). For those who aim at exchange, they approve the purpose more because of the achievement derived from mutual engagement (Mr. M). Therefore, the sense of achievement seems able to strengthen and continue one’s original motivation.

One’s continuing motivation to participate is also supported by shared habits in the group. The shared habit comes from members’ on-going mutual practices. The individual’s motivation to participate in a CoP cannot always rely on having the sense of achievement, but on fostering a habit of engaging in shared practices. When the participants get used to the rescue job, the risky but meaningful job has become a part of their life. In this situation, the voluntary rescuers cannot help but keep participating in the mutual engagement. The ongoing interaction habits enable members to participate in mutual engagement continually to reflect on the established practice and the knowledge domain they usually engage in. Members in the community can then have unspoken consensus to form a joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998).

On the one hand, because the individuals can get a sense of accomplishment through mutual engagement, they strengthen their initial belief (the 6 keys) in participation so that the mutual engagement may keep developing. When the daily interactions last long enough to cultivate members’ habits and unspoken consensus, the 6 original keys may be developed or changed. On the other hand, when the individual can be accepted by the group, the individual can then set his or her mind to engage in social exchange, to have positive interactions with team members and so on, to keep participating in mutual engagement. Because the individual senses that he or she is doing a meaningful job, he or she may feel that it is worth persisting since the initial reasons for mutual engagement are still relevant.

4. Conclusion

Since rescue teams are so important in society, the existence of the CoPs is crucial. From the angle of social assistance, the CoPs can be viewed as an assistance mechanism which will be triggered when the government is inactive. From the angle of professionalism, a CoP can be viewed as a knowledge base through which experts get together to share their insight to sharpen their knowledge to enable the CoPs to rescue citizens from danger.

The CoPs are formed because members learn from the daily sense making activities. The volunteer rescuers experience accidents and value what they are doing. The senses of value, achievement and family-like atmosphere enable the rescuers to shape the community, the knowledge domain and the practices. This study concludes with 6 keys to people’s initial participation in mutual engagement. Some have a strong desire to provide services (being concerned about local affairs, what is taken from the society is used on the society), while others are attracted by a warm atmosphere of interaction, personal interest and gaining something through social exchange. In order to make people feel less pressure to join activities, some rescue teams try to make training programs easy and friendly, to break the barriers to participation.
All of the 10 keys (the 6 initial keys and the 4 continuing keys) are associated with members’ continuing motivation to participate. When people join the rescue team, the 6 initial keys keep developing and become the reason for continued interaction. Because the members have opportunities actually to engage in dealing with rescue tasks, they may enjoy the risky but meaningful job and keep developing the 6 keys. Because it is a meaningful job to them and to the society, they feel it is worth engaging in the daily shared practices. Through daily routines, dealing with rescue tasks becomes a part of their life (the effect of shared habit), which enables shared repertoires, and pushes them towards more mutual engagement. In the meanwhile, daily routines provide members with more opportunities to clarify their identities in the group. When the individual is truly accepted by the group, he or she will feel more comfortable engaging in shared practice and this enables the 6 initial keys to keep developing.

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