

AAC and the Community of Practice paradigm: how newcomers learn from veterans

That Augmentative and Alternative Communication is an interdisciplinary field has been well established for many years, perhaps even from the onset. Back in the late 1960s, Margrit Beesley and Shirley McNaughton (education and speech language pathology professionals) began working together to figure out how to further communication possibilities for children with neuromotor disabilities (McNaughton, 1990); they discovered Semantology/Blissymbolics, which had been created by the engineer Charles Bliss, who could also be described as a semiotician. When we look at AAC through the lens of the Community of Practice paradigm, interdisciplinarity broadens beyond health, education and engineering, that have been traditionally involved in AAC, to encompass professional areas that look at human interaction, culture, heritage, community learning and belonging.

The Community of Practice paradigm is a theoretical framework that comes from the field of Social Sciences/Anthropology, which has been applied to Education, Economy, and the Arts, among various other domains (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The main authors who coined the term and developed considerable research on the approach are Jean Lave (1997; 2011) and Etienne Wenger (1998; 2002) (now Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Lave carried out ethnographic field studies on apprenticeship in various kinds of societies, where people learn and socialize their knowledge in socially-situated participation (Lave, 2011). Wenger has delved into theoretical issues regarding the landscape of practice and the cross-over that occurs as people traverse from their territories to those bordering theirs, and how learning circulates. He is interested in professional development and university level education (Wenger-Trayner; Fenton-O'Creedy; Hutchinson; Kubiak & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The body of study that these authors have put together offers substantial support for discussing AAC by looking at issues related to professional development in context.

Because AAC is eminently an area of practice, it makes sense to look at professional development in AAC as Communities of Practice where people learn about AAC from each other, through participation and practice. Historically, according to Light & McNaughton (2012) in their editorial review of the first twenty years of the ISAAC Journal, much of the clinical practice and research in the early years focused on practical communication needs of patients and board design; they contend that theoretical concerns only began to emerge in literature related to AAC as the new field of knowledge gained greater consolidation. Precisely because of its nature as a field of practice, the Community of Practice paradigm is relevant as a theoretical framework that can be used when looking at how people learn through practice in specific contexts, while at the same time providing theoretical support for studying professional development grounded in the sociocultural approach. (Wertsch, 1993)

The aim of this paper is to present ideas developed by Lave and Wenger and their collaborators and relate them to how newcomers learn from veterans in various contexts, such as university internship, clinical practice and inclusive and special education. The discussion of some of the key principles developed by Lave and Wenger will be analyzed with a view to reports on experiences carried out in Brazil, mainly in the state of São Paulo.

The following contexts will be reviewed, based on studies presented at the VI Brazilian AAC Conference held in Campinas, in June, 2015, complemented by interviews with the authors:

Learning contexts:

- one special education center for children and adolescents with Down syndrome;
- one special education center for children and adolescents with various neuromotor disabilities;
- regular education municipal schools of the Campinas area;
- one university internship program in speech language pathology in Campinas;
- one university internship program in special education in the interior of the state.

The purpose of discussing the theory in connection to actual situations in which newcomers in the field learned from experienced professionals is to perceive if and how relevant the Communities of Practice paradigm is to contributing to the discussion of professional development in various contexts.

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