# Learning on the edge: Connecting people and l(e)arning in the everyday to policy and practice possibilities

**Terrie Lynn Thompson**
**University of Alberta**
**terrie@ualberta.ca**

## Abstract

Workers perched on the edge of the workplace – self-employed contractors and consultants – are often left on their own to create a place and space for their learning activities. This paper explores how these workers participate in informal learning, specifically, how they use (or do not use) web-based technologies to tap into communities of practice. We need to better understand how technology facilitates or frustrates everyday knowledge-building practices that unfold in these types of web-based communities. Delving into several discourses, questions and insights emerge around how policy and practice might be recast to create more inclusive and participatory learning processes in online communities, particularly for these learners situated "on the edge".

This paper unfolds in three sections. First, I briefly outline the precarious nature of the self-employed – or own-account – workers, including work-related learning and work spaces. I then introduce informal learning and the notion of "becoming" a practitioner as we build understandings of ourselves and work-related knowledges. The third and main section of this paper focuses on l(e)arning. Participating in online communities is one informal learning strategy. Community can refer to a gathering of people online that is organic and driven by a shared interest or need. Others are structured, as in an online course, complete with tightly bounded membership and purposeful design strategies. This paper focuses on the former and the challenges for the self-employed worker engaged in these forums for learning. Throughout, critical questions are posed about the normative and ideological connotations of online communities as learning sites. I conclude with ideas on the role of the adult educators within these types of forums.

### The Self-Employed Worker and Precarious Work

According to Industry Canada (2006) a self-employed worker "earns income directly from their own business, trade or profession. … [as] working owners of a …business, persons who work on their own account but do not have a business and persons working without pay in a family business" (p. 24). Industry Canada states that in 2004, they represented 15% of all employed workers, a total of 2.45 million people. Slightly over one-third are female. And yes, the self-employed do work longer hours. In 2004, 36% of self-employed persons worked over 50 hours compared with only 5% of employees, which leads me to wonder how these longer work weeks impact their ability to create space for learning projects.

A few highlights from *The Determinants of Earnings and Training for the Self-Employed in Canada* survey conducted by HRDC provide more insight. In addition to identifying push and pull factors towards self-employment (including the absence of

suitable paid-employment), the report concludes that it is those people who are traditionally disadvantaged in the conventional labour market that are choosing voluntarily to be self-employed: women, immigrants, and young people aged 25-29 (Devlin, 2001). Furthermore, the report points out that women rely more extensively on informal learning than men (Devlin).

Turning to the work and learning discourse it is clear that knowledge and learning are now key economic commodities. In their book, *Workplace Learning*, Bratton and colleagues trace this to the "ideology of investment in human capital" (Bratton, Helms-Mills, Pyrch, & Sawchuk, 2004, p. 40). Foley (1999) outlines how government and business are trying to make enterprises more productive by increasing the flexibility of the labour force. This includes, among other strategies, expanding the secondary workforce, such as contractors and casual workers and vocationalizing education. These strategies fundamentally shape the work and learning opportunities of the self-employed worker.

The life of the own-account worker is contradictory. Drawing from the literature, Tara Fenwick (in press) highlights these contradictions. On one hand, they are seen as and see themselves as free from constrictive bureaucratic structures; active in designing their careers; members of multiple networks and learning relationships; and creators of self-generated boundaries. On the other hand, self-employed workers can be cast as exploited and isolated; oppressed as a result of the blurring of lines between home, family, and work; and engaged in a lifelong human resource project of shape-shifting to adapt to the changing needs of organizations.

Coffield's (2002) description of the employer's perspective of the ideal "portfolio worker" is provocative: those who "quickly internalize the need for employability, willingly pay for their own continuous learning, and flexibly offer genuine commitment to each job, no matter how short its duration or how depressing its quality" (pp. 185-186). There are three notions we can tease out of this rhetoric as a starting point to better understand the work and learning space of the self-employed worker. The first notion is entrepreneurialism. Fenwick (in press) states that these boundaryless workers believe "it is natural and inevitable that they must be entrepreneurial, marketing their own knowledge and labour". This is du Gay's (1996) notion of the 'enterprise of the self', characterized by "values of self-realization, self-direction and self-management" (p. 138). The outcome is a perception of one's career and accompanying work assets as labour commodities in need of continual regeneration. Fenwick (2003) points out that it is "amidst the discourses of flexibility and individualisation" that this idea of the enterprising self has percolated to the top (p. 168).

Flexibility is the second notion embedded in this rhetoric. Crowther (2004) links this to lifelong learning, stating that this discourse is being used to "socialise workers to the escalating demands of employers" under the guise of "flexibility" (p. 127). Fenwick (2002) explains flexibility as being flexible in skills and pay while also adaptable to flexible (aka insecure) work structures. The third notion is self-regulation and discipline, which leads to docile workers. Crowther (2004) warns of the agenda to "create malleable,

disconnected, transient, disciplined workers" (p. 127). Couched within what he refers to as feelings of "endemic insecurity", the only control individuals seem to have is a "willingness to … learn and relearn" (p. 131).

While the qualities of entrepreneurialism, flexibility, and self-discipline are often regarded as admirable personal traits, when mired in a narrow human capital view of labour they can become problematic. This perhaps even more pronounced for self-employed workers who may be more vulnerable than they realize, despite their positive talk of the freedom, choice, and control inherent in their work.

## Informal Learning

Bratton et al. (2004) write that "whereas informal job-place learning was once a taken for granted feature of work, it is now often considered a key job activity and perhaps even a major asset of the corporation" (p. 170). This view of informal learning as an asset available to the corporation to leverage at will extends even moreso to those workers perched on the edge – the self-employed contractors – who are not usually provided with organizationally-funded learning but yet expected by the organization to come equipped with rich learning networks and ability to learn on the fly.

While no one seems to dispute the importance of informal learning, its ephemeral and fluid nature presents challenges for policy and practice. International policy documents, national strategies, organizational mandates and practices, and personal beliefs all interpret informal learning in their own way. The first task is to sort through the quagmire of definitions surrounding formal, non-formal and informal learning and education. David Livingstone (2001) suggests that the primary distinctions are based on whether the directive control of the learning experience rests with educational agents or the learner.

Livingstone (2001) defines *informal learning* as "any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge, or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria" (p. 5). The objectives, content, learning strategies, duration, and evaluation of outcomes are "determined by the individuals and groups that choose to engage in it" (p. 5). Informal learning is distinguished from incidental learning by intentionality. More diffuse forms of learning are often called *incidental learning*. Watkins and Marsick (1992) describe this "largely unintentional and unexamined" and usually the "by-product of some other activity"; there is no conscious awareness of learning (p. 288). In contrast, intentional learning (i.e. informal learning) requires retrospective recognition that you have learned something and experienced a learning process (Livingstone).

A self-employed worker engaging in informal learner may reach out to any number of online communities – informal, non-formal, or even formal – based on learning needs and resources. Let us take a look at how online community in an informal setting differs from online community in formal and non-formal pedagogical settings. Words used to describe communities in *informal settings* include organic, emergent, and self-sustaining. Not created under the auspices of an organization, informal communities form because someone is interested in a topic and searches for others who are talking about it. Informal

communities are ostensibly voluntary. You decide if and how often you participate and are free to opt in and out at will. Challenges in this setting include finding the right online community, making an entrée, wondering if you fit and are welcome, and sorting out your role.

Turning to online community in a *formal learning setting*, one example is an online university course in which the instructor decides that creating a community of learners is a key pedagogical strategy. Learners are slotted into the community when they register for the course. Participation in these communities is often a required course element and marks assigned to this participation. Although a group of learners may interact online throughout the course, whether a "true" community forms cannot be assumed; a question widely explored in the e-learning literature.

Professional associations or workplace established communities are examples of online community in *non-formal settings*. There is some organizational support and belief in the value of cultivating a community, but participation is ad hoc. The organization provides the web real estate and a varying degree of community-building services. Based on my experiences in working with online community in this setting, struggles are competing purposes of the community; tentative moderation of community activities; questions about whether it is indeed voluntary as it is tied to a job, career or a workplace; concerns over who's monitoring what is happening and how this information will be used; and doubts about how participation will impact job or status within an organization.

As illustrated in these brief examples, online community in informal settings is shaped and engaged in strikingly different ways compared to more formal learning environments. With this framework in mind, I turn to the e-learning literature to examine several issues that impact how online community is built and maintained in informal and non-formal learning contexts.

## E-Learning / L(e)arning

*A Social View of Learning*

I draw on situated learning as a foundation for this exploration. Lave and Wenger (1991) state that learning, thinking, and knowing are found in the "relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (p. 51). Communities of practice sprang into vogue with this work. Wells (2002) explains that Lave and Wenger emphasize that "learning is not a separate activity, but an integral aspect of doing things together in a community of practice that involves individuals with different types and degrees of expertise" (p. 123). This view of learning has resonance in many workplaces. Bratton et al. (2004) write that increasingly, "our understanding of how 'learning' in the workplace is accomplished expands beyond notions of individual cognition and 'self-direction' to incorporate awareness of situated communities of practice, mentoring, and the role of social participation" (p. 2).

*Questions about Online Community*

Self-employed workers, who have already internalized the rhetoric of entrepreneurial self, flexibility, and self-regulation, have also been immersed in the "community of practice" rhetoric. There are four questions and issues to explore.

*1. What is it?*
 "Community" can refer to a reason to congregate: a shared physical space or interests. It also refers to a state of being or state of mind – feeling connected with others with a sense of kinship and camaraderie. Community also encompasses the act of communicating with others in a certain way and/or space. Fernback (1999) frames community as "the communicative *process* [italics added] of negotiation and production of a commonality of meaning, structure, and culture" (p. 205). Although the word "community" has instant resonance, its meaning is often murky. A common thread is the belief is that learning is enhanced when there is a commitment to the collective good and people engage in learning through and with others.

The l(e)arning discourse is replete with references to online communities often described as virtual communities or learning communities. The term *community of practice* was used in Lave and Wenger's (1991) seminal work on situated learning and later popularized by Wenger (1998) in *Communities of Practice*. Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) proposed a community of inquiry, essential for achieving higher order learning in an online environment. One also reads about knowledge communities and communities of interest. Related concepts include networks, learning webs, and social capital. Trentin (2001) advocates communities of course alumni as an ongoing support mechanism for learners after a formal learning event. Brown and Duguid (2002) introduce the term networks of practice to differentiate more loosely coupled communities. Prevalent in the business literature are references to peer-to-peer (P2P) networks (Fletcher, 2004). Moreover, online community is now a marketable commodity: Groove, Groupee, and CommunityZero are just a few of the many community software applications available. Online communities have become an important element in corporate marketing strategies (Kawasaki, 2006), which one blogger describes as a product community: "the ecosystem of users and abusers that forms organically around a great product" (Sarkar, 2006, ¶1).

*2. Can community be "designed"?*
Another lively debate focuses on whether virtual communities can and should be designed or are best left to emerge on their own. And moreover, can they be engineered to achieve specific learning outcomes? Wenger (1998) argues that communities cannot be "legislated into existence" (p. 229). This blog posting says it very well: "You can't create community! To say you've created community is like saying you've created a tree. … A better choice of terms would be 'cultivate'. …Communities are self-forming: It's an opt-in list" (Martin, 2006). However, there is a plethora of advice on how to design online community, suggesting that purposeful design is important and we need to learn how to do this. This raises questions: Who is doing the designing? Why? What beliefs are built into the design of the software, the online activities enabled, or the norms of participation? Assuming that people – particularly the self-employed – flock to these online sites for learning reasons, it is valid to question their design. Even so-called

organic "informal" communities have an element of design and a degree of engineering – sometimes quite subtle.

*3. Is reaching out to others online actually a popular learning approach?*

Afonso (2006) advises that the increasing interest in virtual communities is because we find "collective goods in the shape of social capital, knowledge capital, and communion" (p. 156). According to the 2003 *Adult Education and Training Survey* conducted by Statistics Canada and HRSDC the most common informal learning strategies were consulting books or self-teaching. This was followed by, in order, using the Internet or other software, seeking advice from someone knowledgeable, and observation (Peters, 2004). Based on these findings, I wonder how often workers would reach out to others in an online community as an informal learning approach given that these strategies were not at the top of this list. It is important to note however that this data is not specific to the self-employed. Boyd (2006) adds that "interests groups are particularly meaningful to people who don't have access to people who share that interest in their everyday lives" (p. 7). Because the self-employed are more isolated and independent within their own work environment they might be more likely to reach out to others virtually - looking for others with a shared interest as Boyd suggests. Or would they? What prior learning experiences, technology skills and attitudes, work expectations, and pre-existing relationships would cause someone to reach out to an online community?

*4. What is the impact of technology?*

Technology continues to bring people together in ways never before possible. Kolko and Reid (1998) write that the "proliferation of virtual communities in recent years has resulted in the creation of new social spaces, and new forms of interaction and identity formation" (p. 212). This is also fuelled by the new so-called *social software*; a group of Web services that are perceived as especially connective: "blogs, wikis, trackback, podcasting, videoblogs and social networking tools like MySpace and Facebook" (Alexander, 2006, p. 33). What do these technologies do? One feature is social bookmarking and networking for referrals and filtering of information or people; for example, del.icio.us or LinkedIn. Wikis are social writing platforms (Alexander) while blogs are used for production and individual ownership of information. E-portfolios are used for selective release of personal data (Anderson, 2006, slide 35). The potential power of how innovative use of these tools *may* re-configure our conceptions of community and online communities as a site of learning is something we have yet to understand and explore.

*The Ideology of Online Communities*

Policy and practice within the cyberspace elasticity of space, time, body, and relationships becomes complex. The normative and ideological connotations of community present challenges, especially as these communities become wrapped up in notions of work-related learning and identity for the self-employed worker. I have identified three entry points for reflecting on the ideology of online communities, each creating a space for the critical adult educator.

*Power and inclusion/exclusion.*

Online communities bring power relations and questions of inclusion and exclusion. Jones (1998) writes that "the ability to create, maintain, control space …links us to notions of power … Just because the spaces with which we are now concerned are electronic, there is not a guarantee that they are democratic, egalitarian, or accessible" (p. 20). Therefore, we need to question who the gatekeepers are and what kind of gatekeeping goes on. Because communities have borders and margins we need to ask who is being excluded. Tierney (1992) explains that "the social relations of the community are never fixed and permanent, so that a continual struggle exists to comprehend how the community creates its borders to exclude some and give preference to others" (p. 143). He advocates that a critical theory of community "reconfigures centrality, margins, [and] borders" (p. 143).

*Different knowledges and difference.*

Building community also entails tackling the (de/re)legitimization of different knowledges. This includes questioning whose knowledges are dominant as well as legitimizing local and personal knowledges. Difference must be acknowledged, questioned, and engaged, which is especially important in an online community that links people from various places and spaces. However, Nancy Baym (1998) writes that online communities are often critiqued for their homogeneity and lack of commitment. We can leave the community rather than deal with diversity (Jones, 1998). There are a myriad of issues to explore around the long term implications of this way of (dis)engaging in these spaces and how easily we embrace or avoid difference and diversity.

*New online literacies.*

Jones (1998) observes that we can "tap into" a community with any number of technologies from wherever we are. "But connection does not inherently make for community, nor does it lead to any necessary exchanges of information, meaning and sense-making at all" (p. 5). Online communication is a very new and nuanced way of dialoguing that includes discussion, conversation, online writing, and chatting – new literacies. We need to question our preparedness for engagement in these communities. Do we know who we are as a social actor in a cyberspace community? Many l(e)arners are wary about how they and what they have to say will be regarded by others. We wrestle with trust and honesty. Second, online communications have a disarming way of making our private worlds public. How aware of this process is each person in the community? Sophisticated technology literacy is essential in the areas of personal security and privacy.

## Conclusion

The quote from Freire (1970) seems to capture the spirit of community: "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry [people] pursue in the world, with the world, and *with each other*" (p. 58 italics added). Online communities seem to be a natural extension of informal learning practices. It is easy to think of them as a rich learning space for the self-employed worker and they are, especially for these workers who often do not have access to organizationally sponsored education opportunities and may find formal training not

accessible or feasible. I have explored several questions that encourage us, as adult educators, to think more critically about these online communities and their pedagogical value for workers.

If individuals and communities direct their own informal learning, where do adult educators fit? The more we "do" to informal learning, the more we risk altering the essential nature of what it is. The challenge is to shape a role for the adult educator so they support, but not smother, these potentially rich learning encounters in informal and non-formal online communities. I share four recommendations:

- Help construct democratic learning spaces. Oppressive structures can all too easily be replicated within online communities – technology both amplifies and reduces. There is a role for the adult educator to help participants uncover and confront knowledge–power relations and inequities.

- Ensure people can leverage the new technologies (especially the new social software) in ways that maximize their learning opportunities and ability to engage in a meaningful and safe way.

- If involved in "designing" an online community consider less of a top down approach. For example, Boyd (2006) advises design for reinterpretation. No matter how perfect your design, it will be modified, altered or manipulated in use (p. 6). Help an "engineered" community evolve into a more self-sustaining community.

- Continue to question why the self-employed person reaches out to others in an online community. Is this an act of solidarity and wanting to belong or is it merely turning to the only option available? Even in a "community" it is possible some people are solitary and isolated. There may be a role for the adult educator to help facilitate connections and interactions.

In these intersections between l(e)arning and web-based learning technologies, informal learning, and self-employed worker there are tremendous possibilities, especially for people perched on the "edge" of the workplace. Future research and practice should continue to question: (1) What is the significance of online communities for work-related and identity learning?; (2) How does engagement in online communities change work-related knowing and learning?; (3) Do online communities widen access to learning opportunities for the self-employed?; and (4) Does the apparent ease and ubiquity of online community invade the private life spaces of the self-employed; people already challenged to maintain boundaries between work, family, and home? There is more to learn and understand about how the self-employed worker blends their learning – informally and formally, collectively and individually, online and face-to-face – in ways that are purposeful, serendipitous, and subversive and that advance work-related knowing, social actions, and ongoing construction of identity.

# References

Afonso, A. P. (2006). Communities as context providers for web-based learning. In A. D. de Figueiredo & A. P. Afonso (Eds.), *Managing learning in virtual settings: The role of context* (pp. 135-163). Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

Alexander, B. (2006). Web 2.0: A new wave of innovation for teaching and learning? *EDUCAUSE, 41*(2), 33-44.

Anderson, T. (2006). *Social software: Killer app or just all hype? for distance education*. Paper presented at the CADE/AMTEC Conference 2006, Montreal, Canada.

Baym, N. K. (1998). The emergence of on-line community. In S.G. Jones (Ed.), *CyberSociety 2.0: Revisiting computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 35-68). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Boyd, D. (2006). *G/localization: When global information and localiInteraction collide*. Paper presented at O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference, 2006. Retreived August 01, 2006, from http://www.danad.org/papers.Etech2006.html

Bratton, J., Helms-Mills, J., Pyrch, T., & Sawchuk, P. (2004). *Workplace learning: A critical introduction.* Aurora, Ontario, Canada: Garamond Press.

Brown, J. S., & Duguid, P. (2002). *The social life of information.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Coffield, F. (2002). Breaking the consensus: Lifelong learning as social control. In R. Edwards, N. Miller, & A. Tait (Eds.), *Supporting lifelong learning: Volume 3. Making policy work* (pp. 174-200). London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Crowther, J. (2004). 'In and against' lifelong learning: Flexibility and the corrosion of character. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 23*(2), 125-136.

Devlin, R. A. (2001). The *determinants of earnings and training for the self-employed in Canada: Some preliminary findings from the survey of self-employment* (Cat. No. MP32-28/01-12-2E, October 2001)*. Retrieved February 18, 2006 from http://www11.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/hrsdc/arb/publications/research/2001-000078/page00.shtml

du Gay, P. (1996). *Consumption and identity at work*. London: Sage Publications.

Fenwick, T. (2003). Flexibility and individualisation in adult education work: The case of portfolio educators*. Journal of Education and Work, 16*(2), 165-184.

Fenwick, T.(in press). Escaping/Becoming subjects: Learning to work the boundaries in boundaryless work. In S. Billett, T. Fenwick, & M. Somerville (Eds.), Work, learning and subjectivity. New York: Springer.

Fernback, J. (1999). There is a there there: Notes toward a definition of cybercommunity. In S. Jones (Ed.), *Doing internet research: Critical issues and methods for examining the Net* (pp. 203-220). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Fletcher, K. M. (2004). Peer-to-peer networks and opportunities for alignment of pedagogy and technology. *AACE Journal, 12*(3), 310-313.

Foley, G. (1999). Back to basics: A political economy of workplace change and learning. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 31*(2), 181 (15p).

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: The Seabury Press.

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *Internet and Higher Education, 2*(2-3), 87-105.

Industry Canada (2006). *Key small business statistics* (Cat. No. Iu1-9/2005-2E, January 2006)*.* Retrieved February 9, 2006 from http://www.strategis.gc.ca/sbstatistics

Jones, S. G. (1998). Information, Internet, and community: Notes toward an understanding of community in the information age. In S.G. Jones (Ed.), *CyberSociety 2.0: Revisiting computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 1-34). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kawasaki, G. (2006). *The art of creating a community.* Retrieved July 25, 2006, from http://blog.guykawasaki.com/2006/02/the_art_of_cre_.html

Kolko, B. & Reid, E. (1998). Dissolution and fragmentation: Problems in on-line communities. In S.G. Jones (Ed.), *CyberSociety 2.0: Revisiting computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 212-229). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Livingstone, D. W. (2001). *Adults' informal learning: Definitions, findings, gaps and future research* (NALL Working Paper #21 – 2001). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto, Centre for the Study of Education and Work, OISE/UT. Retrieved September 2, 2004, from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/index.htm

Martin, B. (2006, February 17). *You can't create community!* Blog posting to http://caeexam.blogspot.com/2006/02/you-cant-create-community.html

Peters, V. (2004). *Working and training: First results of the 2003 adult education and training survey* (Cat. No. 81-595-MIE2004015). Ottawa, Canada: Statistics Canada.

Sarkar, C. (2006, February 23). The art of creating a community [11:54 am]. Blog posting to http://blog.guykawasaki.com/2006/02/the_art_of_cre_.html

Tierney, W. G. (1992). *Official encouragement, institutional discouragement: Minorities in academe – the Native American experience*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.

Trentin, G. (2001). From formal training to communities of practice via network-based learning. *Educational Technology, 41*(2), 5-14.

Watkins, K. E., & Marsick, V. J. (1992). Towards a theory of informal and incidental learning in organizations. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 11*(4), 287-300.

Wells, G. (2002). Dialogue about knowledge building. In B. Smith (Ed.), *Liberal education in a knowledge society* (pp.111-138). Chicago: Open Court Press.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.