

Postmodern capitalism and the information society create extreme pressures on our educational institutions and professionals. Andy Hargreaves proposes a new model of professionalism for teachers to recover lost credibility and succeed at advancing the learning society despite the pressures of the new economy. Hargreaves describes the basics of professionalism among other things as ingenuity, flexibility, professional trust, and continuous improvement. He further challenges teachers to move beyond these basics and increase their emotional intelligence, becoming masters of working in the realm of adults. To teach beyond the knowledge society teachers must base their professionalism on community, inclusiveness, integrity, collective memory and a cosmopolitan identity. Hargreaves suggests an ideal professional pattern of educators engaging with fellow teachers, parents, and policy makers in communities of practice to yield a healthy learning society. Communities of practice may fail to satisfy the predominant expectations and prove impractical to implement, therefore remaining beyond the reach of many teachers.

Admittedly, communities of practice may allow teachers to better drive the agenda of education, engage professionally with peers and parents, and adapt in a climate of continuous change. Professional communities of practice provide a structure for teachers to act on the suggestions of Hargreaves. Etienne Wenger illustrates the potential for coping with change and improving. We take advantage of our inherent capacities for experiential learning, social learning, and identity evolution whenever we participate in the practice of a shared enterprise. Furthermore, such communities prepare us to reconcile our multiple memberships and the trajectory of our participation over time to form a professional identity. Local communities influence and inform the global environment while allowing a forum for local internalization of change. If implemented and sustained, such professional learning communities might achieve results similar to the Blue Mountain School described by Hargreaves: evidence informed inquiry shared amongst stakeholders that leads to joint responsibility for locally situated solutions.

Communities of practice, however, may fail to prove practical in the face of the predominant cultures and trends surrounding education. Communities of practice require a refocusing of time and attention in new areas, yet Hargreaves shows teachers have less time for activities outside the classroom. Refocusing moves counter to expectations of economic efficiencies associated with slimming down local structures. If external bodies define standards and impose processes for accountability, local communities of practice will not operate outside the realm of what Hargreaves calls “performance training sects”. This ultimately undermines professionalism with false solutions unrelated to local need.

Even Hargreaves’s professional learning communities are not an ideal community of practice described by Wenger, since participation is required, and the “community” probably forces participants to cross domain-boundaries. Natural communities of practice though, may fail to achieve quality expectations, caving to the “system culture”. Communities do not confront the fundamental differences in philosophy present in education such as those typified by Hirsch and Meier who respectively tout fact-based traditionalism vs. critical thought based progressivism. Instead, self-selection eventually leads to “group think” along compatible philosophies. Ultimately, communities of practice are a noble goal, yet the way forward locally is complex and varied when the current political climate expects simplicity and uniformity.

