Communal Identity in a Pluralistic World: 
Resourcing Organizational Learning Theories for Religious Education 

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Abstract: In today’s culture, defined by plurality, interconnectedness, and a globalization that pervade almost every area of life, identity is no longer an isolated, individualized concept. Modernity’s “turn to the self,” is now experienced as a “turn to the other,” and human identity itself is grounded in a self-in-relation-to-others: human personhood is firmly rooted within a web of relationships found in an ever-expanding community. In this context, religious education is an event of communal learning. This paper examines two social theories of “organizational learning” for insights relevant to religious education, as it seeks to addresses the question, “How might religious education, once seen as an individual’s personal “faith-acquisition,” be re-imagined as the opportunity to form a community’s “faith-identity” in a pluralistic world?

In today’s culture, defined by plurality, interconnectedness, and a globalization that pervade almost every area of life, identity is no longer an isolated, individualized concept. We are consciously shaped and formed by influences beyond “our own backyards,” and, further, this formation does not involve only individual growth, but encompasses an ever-expanding communal identity. Today, “who are we?” is just as pressing as “who am I?” and perhaps begs the more urgent response.

In such a culture, social theories of learning, particularly those that pertain to organizational learning—how we learn together as community—are of critical interest to the endeavor of religious education. Yet, resourcing these theories for the task of an education that is specifically religious calls for careful discernment, lest the characteristics that mark an “ecclesial community” be reduced to those of a mere “business organization” in the process. In this regard, two social theories, “Learning Organizations” and “Communities of Practice,” hold interesting possibilities for religious education, particularly that of adults. This essay will briefly
examine the theory of “Learning Organizations,” and then move on to “Communities of Practice.” It will then propose potential inroads in partnering with Adult Faith Formation in Religious Education in view of an educational process that responds to the specific needs of a group that names itself as “community.”

The Learning Organization: Peter Senge

Peter Senge’s theories regarding the concept of “the learning organization,” used by many business organizations as a step toward “teamwork,” have the goal of creating more efficient and productive organizations through teams that learn together. In organizations today, it is no longer possible, as it was in the past, to “figure it out” from the top, while expecting everyone else to follow the orders of the “grand strategist.” Rather, “the organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization” (Senge, 4).

The theory bases itself on what Senge calls “five disciplines,” the primary characteristics for a learning organization: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all five in depth, the foundational discipline—systems thinking—ties them together and offers an overview of Senge’s theory. Systems thinking proposes an approach to problem solving and organizational leadership that looks for the reasons behind an organization’s limited growth and seeks to address causes rather than just symptoms of problems facing an organization. In this way, it pulls together the other four characteristics of organizational learning so that management can encourage an integrated approach to organizational life, rather than one that fails to make
connections between behaviors and random results. This conceptual framework involves a mind-shift toward interrelationships among members and processes of change, rather than looking at issues in a cause-and-effect pattern (Senge 73ff).

In light of these five disciplines, organizational learning becomes a process of “aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire” (Senge, 236). Interestingly, despite the nod to interrelationships among members mentioned above, the literature itself often focuses on “management teams” who take part in group learning processes and then introduce these processes to broader teams of individuals at lower tiers on the organizational chart. Thus, the aligning and developing that Senge describes takes place in a hierarchical manner: management team members consider complex issues, propose innovative action, and then support other teams in the organization as they implement plans. Throughout this process, Senge proposes that the complementary relationship of dialogue and discussion is critical in helping to create a “pool of common meaning,” moving management groups—and then the rest of the organization—to insights greater than what could be attained by an individual alone (Senge 241). Through sharing this process, the entire organization can become more effective through a unified vision and more efficiently strive toward its goals. However, because the wider membership is often omitted from the process at its inception, one must question whether this lack of grassroots involvement affects the overall results, and whether the concerns, needs and desires of all the members are adequately acknowledged or addressed.

Communities of Practice: Etienne Wenger

Etienne Wenger offers another theory, that of “communities of practice,” as “an approach to learning that starts with this assumption: engagement in social practice is the fundamental
process by which we learn and so become who we are” (Wenger, *Communities*, back cover). The theory is not so much about efficiency as it is about *meaning-making* through shared belonging. According to this theory, in order to learn, we need to negotiate meaning, which happens best in a communal environment, through a combination of bringing one’s self and one’s experiences into relationship with those of others (which theorists call *participation*), and engaging with the concrete materials of one’s field (*reification*) (Wenger, *Communities*, 55-71). The kinds of groups in which this negotiation of meaning best takes place are “communities of practice” in which people come together around a common purpose or theme. It is the particular personal relationships formed within these communities that allow members to grow and learn. These relationships forge bonds flexible enough for both diversity and engagement, and the atmosphere thus created provides a space for members coming from various backgrounds to contribute rituals, information and materials for the community’s use that then become shared resources for everyone (Wenger, *Communities*, 72-87). The actual learning occurs within the community’s concrete activities themselves, in which participants use the materials, information and objects from their own particular field of knowledge (*boundary objects*) to make new connections with other members’ expertise (*brokerage*) (105-108). Communities in daily, face-to-face situations—such as members who engage each other in daily work environments—will look different than other kinds of communities, such as a web-based e-community or one that meets only monthly. However, both local and global communities of practice become possible through the principles of meaning-negotiation and community formation.

Besides meaning-making, *identity* is also central for communities of practice, because the social nature of learning in this model allows for a unique process: members both become who
they are by being members and are members because of who they are becoming. This kind of identity-formation occurs, not in isolation but within the context of a community: a community with “permeable boundaries” through which members move back and forth while discovering who they are as individuals and as selves-in-community. These two dimensions are interdependent: neither “rugged individualism” nor a “dissolution of the self into the whole” are viable options. Instead, who we are as community together becomes the focus. This dimension is particularly important in view of modernity’s “turn to the self,” today experienced as a postmodern “turn to the other,” where human personhood is firmly rooted in a web of relationships found in an ever-expanding global community. No longer do we live in a world where existence is an isolated event; rather, we “live and move and have our being” in a radically relational world. Such radical relationality indicates that most people experience multi-membership in several communities of practice (for example, communities of work, family, professional organizations, clubs, recreational groups, etc.) (Wenger, Communities, 145-163) and even the relation among these various identities must be negotiated and harmonized as best possible.

Generally, communities of practice arise naturally through people coming together around shared interests. However, it is possible to think about structuring communities of practice more intentionally and using them for education. The way education is planned, or “designed” (as Wenger calls it) within a community of practice involves both identity and meaning. Because education involves both personal formation over time (identity) and engaging content and materials particular to a certain field (meaning-making) educational design must focus on the adequate interaction of these two elements. In communities of practice, learning
primarily concerns identity and meaning-making in view of personal and communal formation, rather than “content acquisition”—learning the required information—or “competence acquisition”—becoming skilled in a certain field. “Education thus becomes a mutual developmental process between communities and individuals, one that goes beyond mere socialization. It is an investment of a community in its own future, not as a reproduction of the past through cultural transmission, but as the formation of new identities that can take its history of learning forward” (Wenger, Communities, 263).

Ultimately, as Wenger points out, there are significant differences between creating a “community of practice” and more traditional forms of organizational development such as the model that the “learning organization” approach offers. According to Wenger, organizational development usually begins with creating the format (an organizational chart, for example) and then fitting a group into that format’s preplanned structures. Instead, intentionally fostering a community of practice is more about supporting a group through its various stages of growth. This support calls for balancing individual expertise that members bring; holding the knowledge created in common; developing relationships needed to engage in such communal learning; and increasing esteem for the value of communities, especially the current community of practice itself (Wenger, et al, Cultivating, 90).

While intentional communities of practice do have measurable goals to achieve and an objective purpose for coming together, and although they might use dialogue and “team thinking” to reach their goals, their purpose differs from that of organizations. The purpose of the communal learning in communities of practice is the quality of community formed. The focus is community-building that can promote learning through teams of practitioners who are engaged
in identity formation and meaning negotiation. The purpose of the learning organization, instead, is often an efficient organization created through effective problem solving. Despite the acknowledgment that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and the nod to the communal nature of the self (particularly in later works such as *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*), Senge’s learning organization theory is about applying strategies for efficiency. While some of these ideas can be adapted for the purpose of religious education, the pragmatic framework of this theory remains central. Instead, the teleological consideration of communities of practice, in addition to the way that this theory talks about the education process as one of identity formation, make it a richer resource for adult faith formation in religious education.

**Adult Faith Formation and Communities of Practice**

Juxtaposing aspects of the communities of practice theory with Adult Faith Formation principles (AFF) offers some interesting considerations. *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, the US Catholic Bishops Pastoral Plan for AFF, suggests various dimensions that, according to the bishops, characterize AFF. Wenger proposes seven principles for fostering communities of practice, italicized below (see Wenger, et. al, *Cultivating*, 51ff). Although there are points of potential correlation between the two perspectives, direct parallels that offer a “map” for AFF as an exact expression of communities of practice seem artificial. However, some general observations regarding the usefulness of resourcing this theory for AFF are possible.

Wenger’s principles include *design for evolution*, meaning that the very nature of today’s communities presumes a constant state of flux, even as certain continuity is needed to provide the depth that describes “community” beyond a mere “group.” This state of flux describes the
highly mobile population of today’s parishes. Parish communities with clear yet porous boundaries that offer both a sense of stability as well as a warm welcome to new members, can provide opportunities for AFF to speak to people’s lived experiences. It can also allow AFF to branch out beyond more traditional educational settings (classroom learning) in new ways that may be more appropriate to the setting at hand. *Dialogue between inside and outside perspectives* is important for communities of practice, and such a principle offers occasions for AFF to bring together both the faith tradition and the life experience of the participants in an educational moment that can be truly transformative of individual persons’ perspectives. It can create new learning (for example, how other group members embody a “faith-life” may be different from one’s own) and the community will need to integrate new insights into its identity as a group and then into the wider community it belongs to.

Communities of practice *invite different levels of participation.* As Wenger affirms, “sharing tacit knowledge requires interaction and informal learning processes such as storytelling, conversation, coaching, and apprenticeship of the kind that communities of practice provide” (Wenger, et al., *Cultivating*, 9). This calls for AFF to incorporate various learning styles into its educational approach, and according to the learning styles that participants bring to AFF. *Developing both public and private community spaces* reflects the clear yet porous boundaries mentioned above and encourages AFF communities of practice within a parish or similar religious structure to engage in multi-membership within the parish and wider ecclesial community. This strengthens both personal and communal identity and provides for broader meaning-making through varied parish experiences. The idea of “multi-membership” also encourages AFF to become, not an enclosed activity within a parish, but an endeavor that
undergirds everything the wider community does and offers support to the learning of the entire community within different situations.

_Focusing on value_ allows the community’s energy to converge on communal formation and the learning taking place from and among the members, rather than mere “content or competence acquisition.” This does not promote the idea that AFF (indeed, religious education itself) is a “content-free zone” where anything goes. Rather, it offers faith content within the framework of a particular community’s identity: what is being learned together regarding the faith and our lived experience of it? How will this new learning shape us personally and as community? How will this new identity-formation lead us to act in the wider community and beyond? That is, in AFF, content is organized around certain topics and identity is clarified/negotiated by participation and bringing our own experiences to the community. These two elements (content and meaning creation) can then have a wider effect on the world, expressed in a tradition’s social justice practices, for example.

Wenger suggests that communities that are able to combine familiarity and excitement have a greater chance of “keeping it fresh” and attracting newer members, thus challenging AFF leaders to embrace creativity within familiar structures so that participants feel both stretched toward the new and yet assured by what they already know. And finally, _creating a rhythm for the community of practice_ speaks naturally to the various ecclesial rhythms, particularly the cycle of the liturgical year, in which AFF already actively participates and which it celebrates with the entire people of God.
Despite the usefulness of communities of practice for AFF, there are limitations to the theory itself, revealed in further studies beyond the work of Wenger (Kimble et al, 28-30, vol 1. For more on this, see volume 2 as well.). Four are of particular interest. The first regards the possibility that ethical gray areas might arise within a community of practice, which members could be unwilling to address (or unable to see) because they are so invested in maintaining the status quo. (Obviously, the continued scandals within the Catholic community reflect this kind of concern.) The second is a tendency toward conservatism which reinforces the “way things have always been done” and make it difficult for newcomers to offer other ideas and insights through “legitimate peripheral participation”—valued involvement of non-core members—if those ideas advocate change (see Lave & Wenger’s Situated Learning). The third, concerned with power dynamics, questions the greater influence that core members have on the direction of the entire group, despite the theory’s basic assertion of equality in difference among members. This leads to a fourth critique: the theory’s limited exploration of the place/effect of leadership needs development so that the theory can become concretely useful within communities where leaders play a pivotal role.

Such limitations need to be considered and carefully monitored within AFF contexts. Ethical standards both ad-intra and ad-extra regarding these communities and the broader context of parish, etc., need to be maintained. Hospitality toward the “other” and openness to the educational process of traditioning ought to be fostered for new learning. Sensitivity to the power dynamics between educational leaders and learners—one that recognizes that all are learners—should be concretely embodied in AFF’s educational approach. And all of these need to be seen within a broader context of how AFF interacts within the parish as a whole, and a wider ecclesial
setting. How do those engaged in AFF see their role as a participation of multi-membership, encompassing more than what happens “in the classroom,” for the life and upbuilding of the faith community/church as a whole?

In today’s global society, where human existence occurs within communal context, religious education is no longer a quest for personal “faith acquisition,” but rather, must be re-imagined as an invitation toward forming “communal faith identity” in a pluralistic world. The effectiveness of such group learning within a faith community will be largely determined by whether it is focused on efficiency or communio in its learning style. Ultimately, “to draw members into more active participation, successful communities build a fire in the center of the community that will draw people to its heat” (Wenger, et al., Cultivating, 58). In this context, Adult Faith Formation—and religious education as a whole—is challenged to fan into flame the gift received and to invite communities to recognize themselves anew, reflected together in the light of faith.
Bibliography


