A Practice-Based Approach to Understanding Participation in Online Communities

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The take up of online communities in organisations is often patchy. Previous studies, mainly within the cognitive tradition of thinking, explain such non-participation either through features of technology or through individuals’ motivational structures, and look at participation as a static, individualistic and functionalistic phenomenon. The aim of this article is to explore the insights on participation from a practice-based approach (PBA). The paper draws upon empirical data from the use of collaborative technology in a Mexican University. The adoption of community technology is shown to be shaped by dynamic, collective, historical and contextual forces. Based on these findings, the value and the limits of the PBA, and a series of contributions and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Practice-Based Approach, participation in Online Communities, Collaborative Technology, Human Resource Practice, Mexico.

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Introduction

Organisations have recognised the potential value of online communities in enabling knowledge to be shared across organisational boundaries and geographical distances (Vaast, 2007). Online communities have assisted organisations to support their knowledge management initiatives (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Venters, 2010); to strengthen their innovation processes via company-hosted user communities (Jeppesen and Laursen, 2009); and to enhance communication during periods of organisational change (Stoddart, 2007).

However, despite the increasing interest in online communities and the significant investments organisations have made to design technologies to support them, many communities fail to generate useful activity.

Members’ participation is the most critical aspect for online communities to succeed (Butler, 2001). Most previous studies of online community participation have concentrated on individual and
community-related motivations, structural characteristics of communities, and technology-related issues. In this respect research has been influenced by a tradition that offers a static, cognitivist and functionalist portrayal of participation. To explore the value of a different perspective, this paper adopts a theoretical shift (Marshall, 2008). It uses theoretical resources from a practice-based approach (PBA) that open up the potential of offering a more holistic understanding of participation by foregrounding its dynamic, relational, collective, historical, and highly contextualised character. The value of the approach is demonstrated through applying it to a case study of a project to introduce an online community to support a Human Resources initiative in a Mexican university.

The paper proceeds as follows. It begins by highlighting key gaps identified in previous studies of participation that can be overcome when a PBA is used. It then introduces theoretical resources from the PBA. The paper goes on to introduce the empirical study and the methodology used to study the project. It then presents findings informed by the PBA. The value and the limits of the PBA are discussed in the light of the empirical findings. The final section concludes the study and discusses its contributions and implications.

**Participation in Online Communities**

Previous research on online community participation has contributed much to our current understanding, and could be categorised as of broadly three types. In the first group we find studies that look at individual-related and community-related motivations. These studies have shown that participation is driven both by self-interested and more altruistic motivations, and suggest that unless returns are in place, people will be unwilling to participate. These studies have shown how tangible and intangible rewards such as access to useful information and knowledge (Wasko and Faraj, 2000), reputation (Ardichvili et al., 2003), and achieving self-efficacy (Kankanhalli et al., 2005), influence individuals to participate. A second group of studies prioritise the role of the community and thus, rather than the individual, the unit of analysis is the community and its structural mechanisms. These studies focus on how community-level features and processes taking place within the boundaries of communities influence participation. These studies have revealed how participation is shaped by such attributes as membership size (Wang et al., 2012), communication activity and role structure (Butler, 2001). Finally, a third stream of research has highlighted the impact of technology on participation. This research has suggested that technologies supporting online communities must be carefully designed to afford interaction and promote participation (Preece, 2000). Within this body of research, factors such as sociability, usability, technical issues, and technological competence have been found to be relevant when building online communities.

Such literature has increased our understanding of the factors shaping participation. Yet many of these studies seem to work on the assumptions of what has been labelled as a cognitive approach (Marshall, 2008). As Marshall observes, this tradition of research produces explanations that tend to display an individualistic bias, a static portrayal of phenomena, and a positivist orientation when analysing data. In the particular case of online communities, these issues are apparent in the tendency to:

1) suggest that participation can be solely explained on the basis of individual motivations, actions and interests; thus obscuring its social character.

2) predominately focus on understanding what occurs inside the boundaries of communities treating context simply as a static container-like backdrop within which activities occur; thus underexploring the mutual interaction between communication activity taking place in the online community and the context surrounding the community.
3) adopt cross-sectional methodologies to observe solely snapshots of activity; thus underexploring the relevance of the historical context and missing the opportunity to explore the evolving nature of participation.

4) provide causal explanations in the form of statistical relationships among variables and behaviours, thus offering simplistic and reductionist explanations that fail to explore the messy complexity of phenomena.

It is important to acknowledge that not all previous studies adhere to the same narrow perspective found in the orthodox view of the cognitive tradition. The field of online communities has matured and some authors have shown the critical role of the social context and the practices supported by specific communities in the shaping of participation (e.g., Baym, 2000). Nevertheless, more studies of this sort are needed. In response, and in order to offer a different perspective on participation, this paper adopts theoretical resources from practice theory to explore the lack of participation in an online community by paying particular attention to contextual, collective and routine aspects of practice.

Introducing the PBA
The PBA is ultimately derived from the thought of Bourdieu and Giddens (as well as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Garfinkel), and advanced in the contemporary period by Schatzki, Gherardi, and Nicolini. Its proponents have described it as a relatively unsettled intellectual landscape with no unified or authoritative version (Nicolini et al., 2003). However, despite this diversity, these approaches share the quality of giving primary attention to such concerns as context, situation, and practice (Marshall, 2008). One of the central tenets among practice theorists is the idea that the domain of study of the social context “is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time” (Giddens, 1984:2). This view - that reflects an intermediate level of analysis between individualist and societist traditions – provides an illuminating and alternative perspective through which organisational phenomena can be observed.

The use of the PBA has gained increasing prominence in the study of the corporate context and has been applied in fields such as knowledge management, learning, and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Brown and Duguid, 2001); organization studies (Nicolini, 2011; Jarzabkowski, 2004), and information behaviour (Huizing and Cavanagh, 2011; Cox, 2012). It is important to note, that the PBA has been used in studies of adoption and use of technologies (e.g., Orlikowski, 2000; Schultze and Boland, 2000; Schultze and Orlikowski, 2004; Venters, 2010), and has provided a better understanding of how these technologies are used. In this paper, the PBA is used because it has the potential to illuminate the complex interrelationships between people, technologies and practices, as well as the organisational and social constraints that permeate the context that surrounds them.

Positioning the PBA to study Online Community Participation
To guide the discussion of how the PBA can contribute to the study of participation, four relevant themes from this diverse body of literature will be developed in detail, namely: practices as the domain of study, knowing and taste, collectiveness and recurrence, and routinization and emergence.

Practices and their Interconnectedness
A key aspect of the PBA is its move to positioning practices as the domain of study, in doing so it is neither individualistic nor structuralist (Warde, 2005). When taking practices as the domain of study, human action (i.e. adoption and use of information technologies) is perceived to be shaped not by cognitive structures nor by normative influence. Instead, actions are seen as “socially constructed, situated in particular practices and always provisional” (Geiger, 2009). This allows us to observe both
the agency of individuals and how contextual forces influence their actions. Moreover, the PBA stipulates that phenomena cannot be understood in isolation nor taken to be independent of other phenomena (Schatzki, 2002; Nicolini, 2011). Organisations are seen as arenas of interconnected practices (Schatzki, 2006; Nicolini, 2009). For example, when people do not use a particular technology because its use is against institutional practices, Orlikowski (2000) suggests that there is a need to observe the totality of interconnected entities, events, and practices to grasp the meaning of a particular technology in its context. This suggests that the meaning a technology has in a practice will largely depend on the connections this technology has with other elements of such practice and with other practices (Orlikowski, 2000).

**Knowing and Taste**

The view of practices as the domain of study implies the need to focus on “what people do and say, to the world of life made of the details and events that constitute the texture of everyday living and organizing” (Nicolini et al., 2003:28). For instance, previous studies on the use of information technologies using the PBA have looked at practices in situ and observed microlevel dynamics (Vaast, 2007). Scrutinizing practices from this perspective allows the researcher to move away from understanding knowledge as an object, to understanding knowing as an activity (e.g., Gherardi, 2001; Orlikowski, 2002; Gherardi et al., 2007) through which practitioners get things done (Orlikowski, 2002). Thus, knowing is not seen as an abstract idea situated “in the brain of the human body or the organisation” (Gherardi et al., 2007, p. 318). Instead knowing reflects the competency of practitioners to solve problems that emerge in the practices being performed (Gherardi, 2001; Nicolini, 2011). Knowing can thus embrace passion, emotion, desires, attachment to the object of practice and routinised bodily movements (Gherardi, 2009; Gherardi et al., 2007; Reckwitz, 2002). The taste of a practice is about “a preference for the way [practitioners] do things together” (Gherardi, 2009, p. 357).

**Collectiveness/Recurrence**

Collectiveness/recurrence, rather than individuality and one-off events, shape phenomena. For a practice to exist requires repeated performances, repeated shared understanding, repeated rules, and repeated emotions (Schatzki, 2002, p. 105). This is to say that for a particular technology to become an element of a practice, repeated patterns of use are visible. In contrast, when a new technology is introduced but neither collectively nor recurrently used, the technology will not become an element of that practice.

**Routinization and Emergence**

Routinization and emergence are another core theme of practice theories. The stress on routine in some accounts of the PBA reflects the tendency of practices to sink unnoticed into the background of human life. Reckwitz clearly reflects the element of routine in his definition: “Social practices are routines: routines of moving the body, of understanding and wanting, of using things, interconnected in a practice” (2002, p. 255). The other end of the continuum gives more emphasis to open-endedness and evolution and lesser stress is laid on embodiment and the material (Cox, 2012). Schatzki’s definition of practice emphasises this view when he defines practice as “a temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and sayings” (2002, p. 87). In the context of technologies, this helps to explain how the operation and outcomes of technologies are not given a priori, but always temporarily emergent through interaction in its use (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011).
Method

The Research Site

The paper draws upon empirical material from a study of the launching of an online community during the implementation of a HR project within a large multicampus University (INSTEC) in Mexico. The project was intended to be supported by a collaborative technology, referred to here as CODECO. Before the initiation of the deployment of a new performance measurement system across the dispersed 31 campuses of INSTEC, the head of HR at INSTEC realized an online community could be useful to encourage collaboration. He thus introduced CODECO with the expectation that it would become “the exclusive media to be used during the implementation … to support the deployment of the project.” The leader of the project implementation team shared this expectation and believed that “the features of [CODECO] would give people responsible for the implementation the possibility of sharing knowledge and experiences on a frequent basis.” CODECO would: 1) allow project participants to share best practices; 2) make it easy for the head of HR to share news related to the project; 3) provide timely online access to supporting information to deploy the project to all HR staff; 4) promote collaboration and knowledge sharing by connecting HR staff through one platform. Resources were allocated to customize a collaborative technology. Promotional activities were led by a member of the HR staff, who was also in charge of moderation. However, despite the efforts and expectations of those sponsoring it, low levels of participation in the online community were observed and eventually CODECO was abandoned. From the views expressed by people responsible for the implementation in each campus of INSTEC the online community ended up as a failure.

Data collection and Analysis

Practice-based studies require the adoption of methods that embrace a strong involvement in the context of the actors being researched (Charreire Petit and Huault, 2008; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). In tune with this, methods influenced by ethnographic thinking (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Schultze, 2000) were used to gather data. Although the researchers did not have a prolonged stay at the research site, the methods used to collect data sought to minimize the distance between themselves and those being researched. In-depth interviewing was combined with visiting the offices of those interviewed and the work places of other HR staff; having informal conversations with them during lunch; and attending HR monthly-meetings. These close contacts allowed the researchers to observe participants’ behaviors and wider attitudes towards their work. Overall, the purpose of using ethnographic inspired methods was threefold, 1) to understand the role and influence of the online community on the HR practice, 2) to observe the communicative practices of HR practitioners, and 3) to explore the historical context of the use of communication media.

Data collection occurred in three periods. Firstly, we conducted observation of communication activity taking place in the online community over a period of 9 months. In addition, one of the researchers attended monthly online meetings with those involved in the project implementation. Guided by the PBA and given the difficulty of understanding the online community solely from looking at online activity, the researchers’ attention was directed to gather more rich data about HR practitioners’ general responsibilities and their lived experiences during the HR project implementation. This led them to conduct 17 face-to-face semistructured interviews with HR professionals. Accompanying this, we used audio-visual materials and project-related documentation as methods to contextualize the interviews. Thirdly, a further 13 interviews were carried out a year later to further explore the wider practices of HR practitioners, their media use and the role that pre-existing practices played in shaping participation. Interviews focused on how participants conceived the role of a HR practitioner and how this shaped their online interactions. These methods combined with visiting the places where people
worked and having informal chats with them, enabled the researchers to capture the ways practitioners acted and communicated as well as their concerns, priorities, and emotional aspects while performing their duties.

The selection of participants followed a “polar type” strategy aimed at maximizing the diversity of opinions from participants in order to represent the widest possible range of perspectives (Eisenhardt, 1989). Interviewees included those playing different roles in the project, those working in campuses of different sizes, those working in different locations and especially those identified in the online community with different levels of participation. All interviewees were people with the responsibility to implement the project in their own campus; however their day-to-day activities and responsibilities varied across each campus.

The semistructured interviews ranged in length from 50 to 90 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed. The process of analysis followed an emergent logic to develop themes within the data. The study adopted both a data-driven inductive approach, and a more theory-driven analysis influenced by the particular preoccupations of the PBA. By combining these two strategies, relevant themes were allowed to emerge directly from the data, while at the same time theoretical resources from the PBA were used to make sense of it. The process of analysis followed the approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Six stages broadly guided the analysis, namely: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, search of themes, definition of themes, naming themes, and reporting findings. The coding process was not linear, rather it was reflective and iterative, and allowed the researchers to move back and forth across the empirical data and the PBA theoretical resources as required. From the analysis, seven main themes emerged, namely: Marginalization, Variation, Interconnection, Emotional Dimension, Collective Doings of Community, Pre-Existing Media, and Routinization of Media Use.

Findings

When the online community became available to HR staff responsible for the implementation of the project, the online interactions taking place in the community were minimal, despite the efforts made by those sponsoring its use. Even those who enthusiastically promoted participation in the online community, themselves did not participate as they expected others to do. During the nine months of online observation, of all people who were given access to the community, only ten people used the document repository. In the discussion area, just three forums were created in which 15 questions were posted by three people, and only two of them received a reply. The log file evidenced that even over time periods of 10 days nobody attempted to log on to the online community. This low level of participation was also reported during the interviews. Of the 30 interviewees, 24 reported using the online community less than once a month; the remaining six said had participated from one to four times a month.

Having observed low levels of participation in the online community, interviews were conducted to understand the reasons that influenced HR staff not to participate. From the very beginning, the reasons given by practitioners pointed to aspects that went beyond issues of interface design or individual motivation. Rather, it was found that participation was shaped by the specific nature of HR practice and its position with respect to other practices within INSTEC. Recurring comments from interviewees about HR practice such as “the community does not fit the way things are done here at HR”; “what we do largely depends on the pace of other departments of the University” suggested that theoretical resources from the PBA could serve to explore how the character of HR practice and its relation to other practices in the University played a role in shaping participation in the online community.

The next section thus presents the empirical findings that characterize the HR practice. How the nature of the HR practice and its existing routines played a role in the shaping of participation in the online community is further developed in the discussion section.
The Character of HR Practice

Rather than focus directly on the online community as a starting point, the practice approach prompted an exploration of the nature of the pre-existing face to face community into which it had been introduced. It emerged that HR practice at INSTEC had a very particular character. Three features stand out.

HR as a marginalized practice. Practitioners perceived HR practice as a marginalized domain of activity within INSTEC: “The main problem that we have always had within the HR area, is that we are seen as an area giving support to the core activity [teaching] of the University, but never as a core process.” This feature of the HR practice was apparent in a number of ways. For example, HR practitioners continuously experienced work overload and time constraints, as the following comment shows: “What is always lacking is time; and what is always certain is excessive work and pending issues to attend to”.

HR practitioners also perceived the HR practice to be a “supporting practice” with the goal of providing a service to the primary activities of the University (e.g., teaching, research):

“If we do not facilitate employees’ work, why would we be here in the first place? … We have to understand that we are here to help others accomplish their aims. If we do not do this, then we are lost.”

The marginalization of the practice was also reflected in the lack of training and involvement in institutional projects that practitioners faced. Expressions such as: “we receive the minimal amount of resources to operate, or sometimes even less than that” exemplified a shared perception from practitioners of working in a marginalized area. Moreover, HR practitioners tended to be asked to engage in activities that were not related to their duties. When one practitioner was asked about the type of activities that were delegated to her, she responded: “everything you can imagine and everything you could not imagine.”

Variation and interconnectedness in the HR practice. Variation of work activities was the rule rather than the exception. When a practitioner was asked to describe a typical day at work, practitioners’ activities were much more complex and varied than just following a set of formalized rules, procedures and standards decreed by HR Headquarters:

“There are some days on which I spend all my time working only on contracts, especially on Wednesdays. That day is mainly to deal with suppliers, to verify employment contracts of all employees, to create contracts, and so on. On Fridays I try to schedule my meetings, either with my people or with people from any other areas. … However, I usually cannot plan my day because it depends on whether there is going to be a new hiring or not . . . I also need to attend to the demands from my boss and from directors of other areas, without mentioning the fact that, as Human Resources, we do many things that no one else will do … As you can see, my activities vary a lot, but at the same time I have very specific times when I have to deal with them.”

Similarly, HR practice was highly interconnected to other practices being performed at INSTEC: “Here we are not completely independent, I would say it is rather the contrary, what we do - even on a daily basis highly depends on how the campus is moving on a particular day.” Another HR practitioner commented, “I know almost everybody on the Campus … I have had some sort of communication with most of them … Some days I may talk to 30–40 people from different areas … this is the real work of HR.”

The interviews showed that most of the activities practitioners carry out on a routine basis, if not all, (e.g., evaluating employees’ performance), were difficult to isolate from the enactment of other practices occurring at INSTEC (e.g., teaching, grading, doing research). This interconnectedness between practices affected not only the way the practitioners carried through HR practice but also the way people communicated with each other while performing their duties.

The emotional dimension of HR practice. A final feature of HR practice was its highly emotional flavour that embraced “a different range of feelings which are sometimes contradictory and inevitable.”
The HR practice was perceived by interviewees as embracing a mixture of different feelings and emotions, difficult to practise “without getting emotionally involved”. Feelings such as accomplishment, empathy, self-confidence, pride, frustration, powerlessness and uncertainty were considered as a central aspect of their work.

Collective Doings of the Community

The aspects described above defined the character of HR practice at INSTEC which in turn shaped a series of shared doings collectively and routinely enacted by practitioners of the HR community. Five collective doings were identified:

Encouraging maintenance of relationships and continuous interaction.

Relationships were seen as “key within the area of HR,” as one HR director put it: “To me, keeping contact with people who are related to my work is indispensable. Even when I have a minor question, I use this as an excuse to contact somebody who I have not talked to for a long time.” Moreover, despite their condition of working in geographically dispersed campuses, keeping “contacts alive” was a priority:

“For as long as I can remember we, as an HR area, have always been concerned to promote continuous interaction amongst us. Due to the nature of the organization [of being geographically dispersed], it is sometimes difficult to see each other frequently, but we have always been concerned to keep in touch just the same.”

Thus HR practitioners already felt themselves to be a strong community, both in terms of sharing values and having a strong communication network.

Knowing how to communicate.

Being a HR practitioner required “special modes of communication and interactions”. A HR director clearly explained this:

“Well, first we need to be very efficient and effective when communicating. You all know the work overload we have. Second, we have to bear in mind that we are the public face of the University, both internally and externally. Therefore we always have to be professional, and communicate accordingly. And third, we also have to bear in mind at all times that we are HR, and that our clients are people not machines.”

The role of being a HR practitioner thus demanded practitioners adopt particular ways of verbal communication, ways of dressing, ways of addressing people and certain standards of behavior, as well as a need to be aware of the communicative aspect of their bodily actions such as “shaking hands” and “opening the door to others.” These ways of communicating identified them as a group, but were significantly evidenced primarily through embodied and material activities. Communication was not simply a pragmatic requirement but how it was done was a marker of collective identity and shaped by shared values.

Promoting continuous collaboration and support.

Given the lack of resources, work overload, and time constraints that practitioners suffered from, mutual support and collaboration were seen as key aspects of the role:

“We do our best to keep in touch and to help each other whenever possible. This is part of our job on a daily basis, and of course within the [HR] area we all have the same supportive attitude that guides our behavior.”

Moreover, being supportive and cooperative resulted in actions that were beyond the boundaries of work, reflected in a spirit of camaraderie and friendliness among practitioners: “We have a very friendly environment in the area [of HR]. We tend to invite each other to our birthdays. From time to time, we go for a coffee together. We support each other in difficult situations.”
The sense of their being a group under pressure, was the basis of a strong ethos of collaboration and mutual support.

Engaging in continuous learning. Learning was highly valued and “embedded in our daily work” as one practitioner put it. An illustration of this shows how the involvement in different projects required the need for continuous learning:

“Look, for example, right now we are involved in eight different projects. As you can imagine, this situation demands an enormous amount of time, and for much of that time you have to spend it learning new methodologies, new models, new systems, new ways of evaluating, and new regulations. I feel this culture that we have developed of continuous learning is what has taken us to the place where we are today.”

Learning was another core shared value. Given the lack of time and work overload that HR practitioners routinely faced this shared knowing was enacted in the form of learning-by-doing, so that the ethos of learning also reflected their shared dilemmas as a professional group.

Prioritizing operational continuity. HR practitioners prioritized operational continuity over other activities, e.g., their participation in institutional projects. Expressions such as “the project is now on standby because we have overwhelming pressure from our daily activities” were commonly heard among practitioners. Their practices reflected this: “I feel that we all share the same concerns and have the same priorities. Priority number one: keeping the operation of the campus going. Main concern: finding enough time to achieve this aim.” Somewhat in tension with their commitment to learning the need to keep things going was another shared value. It was linked to their sense of being under pressure and congruent with the sense that their purpose was as a support to the practices of others.

Thus there emerged a set of shared knowings and doings which characterized the HR practice. This set of knowings were found to have three shared features, namely: 1) they were routinely and collectively enacted by practitioners; 2) they allowed practitioners to get things done and solve practical problems; and 3) they embraced, among other things, passion, bodily movements, and ways of wanting and feeling. Together with the features of the HR practice identified in the previous section, these elements help characterize the flavour of the HR practice as performed at INSTEC.

Discussion

The Failure of CODECO

Taking the practice approach as our theoretical lens, we build on the character of the HR practice and the shared knowings identified in the previous section to show how these features shaped participation in the online community. Three aspects of the HR practice are shown to be key in determining the low participation, namely: CODECO not fitting the character of the HR practice, the inability of CODECO to support the enactment of shared knowings, and the pre-existing, routinized patterns of media use.

CODECO not fitting the character of the HR practice. A general concern of HR practitioners was that when the head of HR introduced CODECO, they did not find the online community ‘fitted’ the local HR culture: “It just does not go with how we work here. Do not forget that we are HR we are not very technologically oriented”; “[how we interact with people] matches our profession.” One director put it as follows: “[how we already interact with people] matches our profession.” When she was asked about CODECO she replied: “To be honest, what I, and many others did, was to ignore it and just continue our previous ways of interaction.”
From the analysis, it emerged that CODECO did not support different elements of the character of the HR practice. Firstly, as work overload and time constraints characterized the HR practice – reflecting its marginalized character – HR staff perceived their participation in the community was a time-consuming activity which conflicted with work overload:

“Rather than being helpful to me, I found myself browsing and spending a lot of time finding the job description I needed. It might be that I am exaggerating a bit, but with the workload we have to deal with, every minute spent in the [online] community counts.”

Secondly, most of the activities practitioners carry out are difficult to isolate from the enactment of other practices. Given the interconnectedness of the HR practice to the other practices of INSTEC, it meant that on many occasions HR practitioners’ actions were activated by other departments, and in turn their media choices were affected by this fact:

“One of the main characteristics of our work as HR directors is that many of the things we do are initiated as a consequence of the demands of other processes … So, rather than being ‘active’ in our choices to select the media we prefer to communicate through, we have a ‘passive attitude’ in the sense that it is other people who decide how they communicate with us.”

As other practices performed at INSTEC activated HR practices, practitioners’ choices of selecting the media used to communicate were mostly “passive”; meaning that existing practices and not practitioners themselves moulded their choices. This gave HR staff the feeling that “there is no way to escape from [the use of particular media]”:

Thirdly, a highly emotional flavour was another feature of the HR practice. CODECO was not fully supportive of the emotional dimension of the HR practice:

“Here we are used to communicating via email, but the truth is that we always prefer more personal communication. Now that the [online] community has been introduced, I do not see much benefit from using it. Among other things, because it does not let you express yourself as you probably can do via the telephone or personal interaction. Sometimes you just want to talk to someone who understands and shares your concerns.”

Inability of CODECO to support the enactment of shared knowings. CODECO failed to support the enactment of shared knowings. CODECO did not offer practitioners opportunities to develop and maintain existing relationships, nor occasions to create new ones, as the following remark shows:

“Here, within the HR area, we like to communicate, to talk, to get as much as we can from every interaction, and to keep in touch all the time. I think one of the main flaws of this community is the fact that it does not support these kinds of interactions.”

HR practitioners had a clear preference for face-to-face interactions, a critical element of the communicative knowing of practitioners. This preference of HR staff privileged more personal communication, thus undermining the use of CODECO once the community was introduced, as one director suggested:

“It is funny because, when you are in those workshops, you ‘feel’ you are with Human Resources people. Everybody is polite, everybody shakes hands, everybody interacts, talking, smiling; I think even for people who do not know who we are, they would probably guess we are Human Resources people … The [online] community just does not suit this well.”

Interviewees also commented that they did not find the same attitude of collaboration and support when using CODECO, that were found via other forms of interaction, as one HR director explained:

“I don’t see a lot of interaction in the community, so how are they expecting us to participate? … It gives me the impression that the community is not suitable for promoting the attitude of support that we are used to whenever we contact people more directly.”

Similarly, practitioners valued learning highly, but they perceived other sources as being more supportive for their learning activities than CODECO. The shared preference of practitioners for those
experiences where they could “learn from the expert,” “see how things are done in the field,” or “have more individual interactions [for learning]” reflected this:

“I do not see the [online] community as being helpful or supportive for learning. I have the feeling that the process of learning is more complex and, in general, it requires deeper interactions where you have the possibility to see how things are done in the field, or where someone else clearly explains to you how things work”.

Prioritizing operational continuity was a shared knowing shaped, to a certain degree, by the overwhelming workload and time pressures faced by HR staff on a daily basis. Their priority to maintain the daily operation of the University strongly shaped their media choices, as one member of the HR staff commented: “It is not really about what I like, but more about what my activities demand … I would say that our needs define how we communicate. In the end the most important thing is to get things done.”

**Pre-existing media and routinization of media use.** When the collaborative technology was introduced to support communication and knowledge sharing during the implementation, the access practitioners had to a variety of existing media threatened its usage. Based on the 30 interviews conducted in the study, Figure 1 shows that, in addition to CODECO, face-to-face communication, the use of media such as e-mail, telephone, instant messaging, videoconferences, and the organisational intranet (intranet), were in common use.

Indeed, when *CODECO* was introduced, the pre-existing media (e.g., e-mail, telephone, virtual meetings) made HR practitioners perceive little need for *CODECO* to be used at all, since the existing media were sufficient to support their communicative practice: “I think all technological effort has to meet a need … I do not feel uninformed or isolated. On the contrary, I have a range of media already available to communicate with [people working in the project].”

Moreover, since HR practice - and other practices at INSTEC – were enacted repeatedly, an element of routine developed. This routinization was materialised in a series of habits, shared understandings, and non-reflective actions performed by HR practitioners. This feature of habituation not only affected the performance of the HR practice, but also shaped how and through which media, practitioners
communicated in their everyday work activities. Thus, after practitioners routinely enacted the use of certain media over time, HR staff perceived the use of these media as a “natural” way of communicating that led them ‘not to think about their media choices’. This in turn made it difficult for practitioners to change their previous routines and use CODECO instead, as shown in the following comments:

“Within the area of Human Resources we have been using these media [telephone and e-mail], as the mainstream media for quite a long time and in such a way that the habit of using them has led us so to a point where it would be difficult to move to a different media, unless a real need is perceived.”

This comment clearly shows how when CODECO was introduced into HR practices, the routine patterns of interaction developed in the past, come to life and influence practitioners’ willingness to participate, perpetuating the use of existing media rather than opening up the alternative of using new channels.

The value of the PBA
The use of theoretical resources from the PBA helped in conceptualizing participation as a socially-enacted phenomenon in which the collective is privileged over the individual. The focus moved from looking at the interests and motivations of particular individuals to paying attention to collective understandings, shared ways of doing things together, and shared concerns and priorities, as influencing participation. The HR practitioners’ collective focus on promoting continuous collaboration and support and on continuous learning, and the inability of CODECO to support these processes, are clear examples of this.

Using the PBA helped to avoid the view of participation as being shaped solely by what is taking place within the “community” itself, as if it were assumed to be located in a vacuum. Instead, the PBA gives life to context and helps turn our attention to how different aspects of the context surrounding the community shaped participation. Participation was not only influenced by the features, shared knowings, and taste of the HR practice, but also by the interconnectedness the HR practice had with other practices being performed within the site. HR practitioners felt they had “no other choice but to use the media that everybody else uses” because their interactions as practitioners of a supportive practice were supported by these existing media.

The PBA also challenged the view of participation as a static one-time and isolated event. In the light of the PBA, the historical context of participation is brought to the fore, and helps to explain how the past – acting as a force and reflected in aspects such as routinization and inertia – shaped current activities (e.g., participation). In the case of CODECO, ingrained habits of media use tended to be reproduced, rather than the new communication channel being adopted.

The PBA was also particularly useful for looking at the micro-dynamics taking place within the HR practice; it helped zoom in on practices. This prompted analysis of HR practice in real time and how local accomplishments and emergence occurred. This contributed to understanding how sayings, bodily doings, shared knowings and emotions, taste, routines, and habits play a role in the shaping of participation. The marginalization felt by HR practitioners, the role of the body in the performance of the HR practice, the shared knowing collectively enacted by HR practitioners, the preference of HR practitioners for face-to-face interactions were all aspects that influenced participation and could be observed when practices were zoomed in on.

The limits of the PBA
Using the PBA as a theoretical lens to analyze participation offered an insightful perspective; however, it offered only a partial understanding of the phenomenon of participation. This was in part because
of the selection of particular theoretical resources from the PBA that paid attention to some aspects of the situation and not others. An alternative selection of theoretical resources might have shed light on other aspects of the practice. Two aspects are relevant to highlight here. Firstly, from the analysis conducted in this study emerges a concern, initially expressed by Fox (2000), that the PBA does not say much about how practitioners of a community change or innovate their practices. This is because the PBA tends to obscure the power of individuals by favouring the collective character of practices, and thus neglects to supply accounts by which individuals contribute to change. An alternative approach influenced by ANT offers a powerful way to explore such issues (Rivera and Cox, 2014). Secondly, it has been suggested that an adequate social theory needs to pay attention to three levels of analysis: micro (individual), meso (organisational) and macro (institutional). Only by looking at the dynamics among these three levels of analysis can organisational phenomena and change be understood. In particular, this critique of the PBA points to the risk of underexploring how aspects at the institutional level shape local accomplishments. It remains as a problem for the PBA to explain how social structures, macroforces and relations of power in which the community is embedded (such as capitalism, employment relations, or religion) influence the performance of local practices (Contu and Willmott, 2003). For example, in the case of a PBA account of CODECO little attention was paid to religion, given the extent to which Catholicism shapes educational, professional and family practices within Mexican society.

Conclusion, Contributions, and Implications

This paper has contributed to deepening understanding of participation in online communities by moving beyond those perspectives that see it as a static, decontextualized, and individually motivated phenomenon. Instead, the paper has suggested that participation must be seen as a dynamic, historically shaped, context-dependent, and collectively enacted phenomenon. The PBA helps understand how routines and habits of media use acted as a force that reduced participation in the online community. It also contributed to understanding how participation was not only influenced by the internal dynamics of the community but also by the interconnectedness of the HR practice to other practices of the University. Using the PBA also showed how participation was a collective endeavor shaped by shared ways of doing things and knowings in the HR community. The paper has provided a set of relevant themes from the PBA that may be helpful to others when studying how technologies are used in practice.

The study has implications for practice. For practitioners, designers of community technology, and organizations taking part in initiatives to promote the use of collaborative technologies, this study suggests the value of looking at the current patterns of interactions and media use to explore how these might align or conflict with proposed new technologies. Consideration should also be given to being alert to how existing ways of doing things can be maintained and making efforts to ensure that communities fit the flavour of the practices that are to be supported. Thus in order for those setting up communities to be successful there is a need for a good understanding of the environment into which online communities are introduced, rather than only focusing on the interface design or motivations of individuals. In this light, attention turns to what practitioners actually do in their daily work, how they meet their information needs, how they communicate on a daily basis and the media they use to do so. Our findings thus suggest that those involved in building communities within organizations need to explore how technologies can become integrated into the regular work of practitioners as well as to the larger organizational context and the relations that might exist between practices. The principles may potentially apply to the adoption of any information and communication technology.
References


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