

# LEVERAGING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: BALANCING THE DUALITY OF PARTICIPATION AND REIFICATION

Eric Cheng

The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Tai Po, NT Hong Kong

## Abstract

*This paper discusses the duality of participation and reification in cultivating communities of practice (CoP) for leveraging knowledge for organizational development. CoPs have been shown to encourage member participation in collaborative learning and to enhance knowledge acquisition from each other (Wenger, 2004). It is a knowledge management tool for capturing organization knowledge. However, to launch a CoP in any organizations is difficult, for it cannot be man-dated or created, but it can only be coordinated, facilitated, and cultivated (Wenger, et. al. 2002). The model of community of practice is based on the idea that one cannot separate knowledge from practice (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Through participation in the CoP's activities, knowledge of CoP members could be captured and codified into tangible capital, this "making things real" process is called rectification. Participation and rectification are in constant tension with each other and this relationship could be explained by a Yin-Yang relationship. The theory of yin and yang is used to describe how the seemingly contradictory forces of participation and rectification are intertwined and interdependent in cultivating a CoP for leveraging knowledge in organizations.*

*Knowledge expansion, government economic policy and changing business environment altogether create impact and challenges to any business organizations. Knowledge on how to perform business goals is critical issues for organizations' sustainable development. Organizations should cultivate a knowledge sharing culture, support staff to have a professional identity as knowledge workers and capitalize on existing knowledge recourse to address the issues. They should implement knowledge management (KM) practices for tackling these challenges. A CoP is one of the common KM tool to support organizational development.*

*A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people having a joint enter-prise to improve their professional practice. They engage mutually in CoP activities and aim to create a sharing repository for knowledge sharing. A CoP can be applied as a knowledge management tool for leverage knowledge. A CoP cannot be self-created, but requires cultivation and facilitation. Facilitation of CoP is to be done through balancing participation and rectification.*

*Participation is used to describe the activities of members in engaging with other community members and in the life of the community. It is not limited to simple collaborative behaviours. "It can involve all kinds of relations, conflictual as well as harmonious, intimate as well as political, competitive as well as cooperative" (Wenger 1998 p.56). Because of the participation, CoP members could develop their identities if the CoP. Because participation in a community contributes to their identity, they carry your participation with them wherever they go.*

*Reification means "making things real". A CoP creates artifacts such as documents and transcripts and records in the course of their activity. Reification points to the activity in a CoP of transforming knowledge into tangible and transferable capital. A CoP produces knowledge but rectification, the process of producing knowledge, do not merely support communications and interactions between participants. Eventually, rectification become a payoff to the KM activities.*

*Between participation and rectification, they form a mutually supportive ecology. They are in tension because if either one dominates, then the other one suffers, and the community will collapse. If participation dominates at the expense of reification, then the value of participation to members suffers, and so participation declines. If reification dominates at the expense of participation, then the life and richness of the community disappears, and reification itself dries up (Wenger 1998 p.65-71). While this duality may appear highly theoretical, it has some very practical implications for how communities are established, resourced and managed. The Yin-Yang Theory may help us to catch the point of balance.*

*Yin and yang is a concept in the ancient Chinese philosophy. It originates from the Book of Change (also known as I Ching or Yi Jing), which is a mixture of Confucian and Taoist ideas. The Book of Change represents a Chinese divination system as well as a classical philosophy based on the yin yang theory. It consists of sixty-four hexagrams which are formed by six broken or solid horizontal lines. These hexagrams imply different combinations of the yin and yang theory and form the reality in Chinese Taoism. The basic principle of yin yang is also illustrated by the yin yang symbol, with black representing yin and white representing yang. The symbol reflects the inescapably intertwined duality of all things in nature. No quality is independent of its opposite that it did not contain its opposite in a diminished form.*

*When yin and yang operates, a dynamic relationship is reached between them. They are interdependent and support each other, meaning that one cannot have existed without the other as they are equal aspects of the oneness or the seamless whole (Mun, 2006; Hue, 2010).*

*The concept of yin and yang is thought to be the origin of Universe in the ancient Chinese philosophy. It is used to describe how the seemingly contradictory forces are intertwined and interdependent in the nature and how they give rise to each other, which in turn produce and reproduce the endless variety of life and the world. According to the yin yang theory, culture is necessarily constituted by both homogeneous (yin) and heterogeneous (yang) elements. Change in culture refers to the dialectical transformation of yin into yang and yang into yin. A cultural description that focuses only on either part of the elements is clearly incomplete with regard of the Taoist view. Opposites thus only exist in relation to each other. Based on these basic concepts, a complete system of opposites was dialectically elaborated: Everything in the world can be identified with either yin or yang aspect. The yin and yang aspects are not identified in isolation but really a mixture of the two. Neither yin nor yang alone could nurture itself, but do it with mutual generation and promotion. They oppose each other but at the same time mutually include each other. They may transform into each other over time when one polarity goes to the extreme (Wang & Zou, 2011). In view of this, reality is represented by yin and yang forces, in which the two forces complement each other (Yuan, 1997).*

*Nowadays, the Book of Change based on the yin yang theory has not been merely confined to oracle or the traditional cultural domains. Instead, its discourse has been extended into modern science and other realms, such as politics, economics, management and even in Mathematics. The development of the yin yang philosophy has been widely adopted by the Chinese for explaining the complexities of the social, political and natural worlds, and for building up knowledge of sciences, medicine and astronomy (Hue, 2010). To get a truer understanding of reality, we need a perspective that focuses on both two parts. This complementary approach could enable us to see a more complete picture of the issues involved than an either-or approach.*

*In the past, many researchers applied Taoism or the yin yang theory in different fields and to analyse the field with a particular perspective of the theory (Hue, 2010; Wang & Zou, 2011; Davies, 2010; Cunha, Cunha & Dahab, 2002; Durlabhji, 2004). For instance, Durlabhji (2004) applied the yin yang principle in Organisation Behavior. His study revealed the presence of yin yang dynamic implicit in different concepts and he suggested a new ways of looking at these concepts. He also suggested a general principle of yin yang balance as an essential dynamic for performance and harmony in a wide variety of contexts. Cunha, Cunha and Dahab (2002) applied a dialectical approach in quality management.*

*He concluded that the reflexive and intuitive side of quality management combines with the masculine side, just as in yin and yang and that quality is the result of neither yin nor yang, but of the complementary between the two. On the other hand, Wang and Zou (2011) studied the relationship between globalisation and anti-globalisation based on the discourse of yin yang theory in order to develop an interdisciplinary analytical method through the oriental philosophy.*

*Davies (2010) made use of the Book of Change to contribute to the theory, nature and practice of leadership in general and moral leadership in particular. In the paper, the author tried to speculate whether moral influence is also one of the effects of a leader. He emphasised the ethical values in the Book of Change for any successful leader's mission and work.*

*Based on the discourse of Taoism and the yin yang theory, this paper aims at examining the yin yang theory for its potential contribution to the cultivation of a CoP, in an attempt to gain a balance between participation and reification, and to suggest what will be the idealistic structure for cultivating a CoP.*

Keywords: Communities of Practice; Knowledge Management; Theory of Yin Yang

Reference:

- Cunha, M.P., Cunha, J.V.D., & Dahab, S. (2002). Yin-yang: a dialectical approach to total quality management. *Total Quality Management*, 13(6), 843–853.
- Davis, A.J. (2010). Leadership wisdom of the I Ching. *Journal of Sino-Western Cultural Studies*, 1, 223–239.
- Durlabhji, S. (2004). The tao of organization behavior. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 52, 401–409.
- Hue, M.T. (2010). Influence of taoism on teachers' definitions of guidance and discipline in Hong Kong secondary schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(4), 597–610.
- Mun, K.C. (2006). *Chinese leadership from the book of change*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University press.
- Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The knowledge-creating company*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Community of practices: Learning, meaning and identity*. New York: Cambridge University.
- Wang, N., & Zou, Y. (2011). Yin-Yang theory and globalization. *Studies on Sociology of Science*. 2(2), 38–49.
- Yuan, R. (1997). Yin/Yang principle and the relevance of externalism and paralogic rhetoric to intercultural communication. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 11(3), 297–320.