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So you want to make a change in your school – your chances of success are based on your *Community of Practice*

We all live, work and play in social settings or groups. We live in groups called families, we work in groups called crews, offices, sections, departments, staff, schools or classes and we play in groups called clubs, leagues or teams. Each of these groups can also be described as a 'community'. Each community has its own informal rules and practices. Some families rise at 6 am, others at 7. In some families parents make break- fast for their children. In others, children make breakfast for their parents. In some schools teachers are called by their family names, in other by their first name. In some schools children sit in rows, in others they sit in groups of four. In some dance groups dancers rent their costumes, in others they buy them, in still others they are allowed to use them free of charge.

By looking at our school or classroom as a community we can more easily see how it changes over time and who influences it. Communities are organized formally and informally and people within them have varying degrees of influence. Sometimes the person with the highest rank in the unit or community has the most influence in some matters while someone with a lower rank has more influence in other matters. For example, the school principal may have the responsibility for completing and submitting formal documents to funders but the teacher with the best sense of humour may have the most influence over all members of the school! In the 1990's two researchers, Lave and Wenger, revealed important characteristics of communities.

Communities are a joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members. People come together for a purpose. They express their purpose through goals, objectives, missions and constitutions. Over time the purpose changes to meet the needs and interests of the new members. Sometimes the change is radical and groups separate from one another and give themselves new names. Sometimes it is slow and subtle. There is a place for all types of change as long as it meets the needs of its members.

Communities function according to a mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity. How people inter- act in order to meet the goals, purposes or missions of their group can be governed by formal and informal rules. Formal meetings may follow Roger's Rule of Orders, especially when it comes to matters of voting about how money will be spent or who will take on leadership positions. Informal meetings may be guided by the courtesy of not interrupting others when they speak and giving everyone equal opportunity to express their own ideas. Both formal and informal meetings may reserve a special place for those seen to add special insights to the community, such as former leaders or long time members with special skills or knowledge.

Communities create and produce based on a shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time. People fit into a community because they know how it operates and how to make the best of what is available. The school that says ‘we have no money’ and means ‘therefore we can not do anything creative’ has a shared sense of defeat. The school that says ‘we have no money’ and means ‘but we can do THIS much’ has a shared sense of optimism. To get anything done requires time, energy and re-ward. The reward may be personal satisfaction, renewed optimism or victory over the limited financial resources.

Members who are listened to or followed in a community such as a heritage language school or classroom can be described as being at the centre of influence. They have good connections with most members of the community, know the routines, traditions, re- sources and values of the community and already have a reputation of being successful. If they propose a change in direction they may be listened to.

Members who are new to the community and not yet able to influence it can be described as being at the peripheries of participation in the community. No matter what position they hold, they may not have the support of its members. When an authority imposes change from the top down that change may not be very popular or accepted. When ideas for change come from members of the community or the grassroots it may be more quickly accepted and adopted. Because new people are always joining a community (whether by birth into a family or hiring of new staff or because of a promotion to a new responsibility) and leaving it (by retirement, relocation or lay off) it is always changing. We say that new members are apprentices in the community. They are learning to operate within the rules of the system. Because learning these practices takes time, only when one has the support of one’s community does one gain the opportunity to have influence. That’s at least one reason why change happens slowly. . . Without a community that shares values and practices an individual will have difficulty sustaining personal change and impacting others.

This long introduction of background information is designed to help you reflect on your community – your heritage language school, your place in it and the mechanisms that help it change. Every member of a community influences and changes it so the more active you are the better chance you have of impacting it. If, for various reasons, you have not been able to be so active, then you can still provide support to those who are by acknowledging their hard work and encouraging their creative contribution.

Lave, J. and E. Wenger

1991 *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

For more information about COMMUNITY of PRACTICE:
<http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>

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