

Lifelong learning community development: A case study of Thailand

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Abstract

The objective of this research was to analyze the context of lifelong learning community development, a case study of three communities in Thailand, namely Puparn Royal Development Study Centre, Sakon Nakhon, Small and Micro Community Enterprise Doichang Macadamianut, Chiang Rai and Teacher Professional Learning Community at Satit Pattana School, Bangkok. This qualitative research employed a structured interview as a tool to collect data. The subjects of this study were 15 people who were the executives, the officers and the members of the mentioned lifelong learning communities. Collected data were analyzed using content analysis. The findings revealed that 1) the Main Goals of these communities arose from the needs to solve local problems which vary with the backgrounds of the communities, 2) the Community Members were internal personnel of the organizations and external people who liberally joined, 3) the Learning Process and Characteristics began from Local Problem Occurs to Collaborative Learning in order to find a solution, 4) Internal and External Support from members of the communities were the main factor to a successful operation, 5) Operation Evaluation was conducted by having meetings regularly to continuously analyze and follow-up on performance and 6) Building Lifelong Learning Community Network was emphasized due to the benefit of knowledge development, good practice sharing as well as the strength enhancement of a lifelong learning community.

Keywords: learning community development, lifelong learning, lifelong learning community, Thailand

Introduction

The rapid changes in society, economy, politic and technology these days are the outcome of technological advancement and structure changes in the world economy and politic (Office of the Education Council, 2013; Haseeb, Hussain, Kot, Androniceanu, & Jermisittiparsert, 2019). Having surrounded by such environment, every individual must have the essential attribute called learning in order to adapt and cope with the endlessly environmental changes (Hartinah, Suherman, Syazali, Efendi, Junaidi, Jermisittiparsert, & Umam, 2019; Novalia, Ahid, Cahyadi, Faelasofi, Pertiwi, Putra, & Jermisittiparsert, 2020). UNESCO (1968) stated that learning is necessary for human beings at all ages because social and environmental changes always happen. It means that knowledge and skills acquired from schools are inadequate to face the challenges of the fast-moving world. Learning, therefore, must be continuously carried out throughout a lifetime (Buntat et al., 2013). Thus, all human beings must have such attribute as the advantage to strongly live throughout changes. This basis will contribute to a strong and sustainable community, society and country.

Lifelong learning covers the whole range of educational forms happening throughout a person's lifetime including formal, non-formal and informal learning from pre-school to post-retirement. It aimed to develop an individual to have skills needed for employment or personal fulfillment such as problem-solving, teamwork, communication and adaptability skills and to reach his/her potentiality (Buntat et al., 2013; Drigas and Tsolaki, 2015; Laal, 2011). Lifelong learning emerged from a person's motivation for self-learning using sources from the educational system and also outside (Sunanchai, 2001). The characteristic of lifelong learning is learning that a person can do in any desired form. This flexibility, therefore, makes lifelong learning a suitable way for each individual (Davey and Tatnall, 2007; Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education, 2008). However, lifelong self-learning has limitations. It is limited by ability, time and budget. Fortunately, performing a learning community can gather

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resources and share them among members to foster their learning and facilitate a community to efficiently utilize these resources. This will, eventually, support a person's lifelong learning.

A lifelong learning community means a group or a community in a village, a city or a region that gathers local learning resources to support learning and training. It is focused on lifelong learning that meets members' needs and it is open for any person in the society to participate for the purposes of local empowerment, better life quality and society prosperity (Arden et al., 2008; European Council and European Commission, 2010). The established community must have awareness and exertion to analyze the social situation in order to create guidelines for their community development (Office of the Education Council, 2010). Establishing a learning community is not only to share valued learning resources among a community but also to stimulate members to learn (Tsang et al., 2007). Stoll et al. (2006) and Tahir et al. (2013) explained that a learning community helps to increase members' enthusiasm and encourage them to have responsibility for others and society. Also, it inspires members to seek new knowledge and to jointly learn about their common interests. Moreover, a learning community assists members in decision-making based on their contexts, objectives and available professional knowledge (Vescio et al., 2008). Therefore, lifelong learning community development will boost the efficiency of a member's lifelong learning.

From the benefits of a lifelong learning community, the author, therefore, is interested in studying the context of lifelong learning community development from high experienced communities, where they have been accepted at the national level for its operation's performance, to understand the current situation, obtain up-to-date information and importantly examine the elements of the communities. Besides, the gains from this research would be beneficial for proper model development of a lifelong learning community. Moreover, it would benefit as guidelines for operation system improvement of a lifelong learning community, resulting in a strong and sustainable lifelong learning community.

Literature Review

The study on context of lifelong learning community development is based on two main concepts which are lifelong learning and a learning community.

Lifelong learning concept refers to the activities people perform throughout their life to develop their knowledge, skills and ability in a particular area which motivated by some personal, societal or employment requirements (Chen, 2015; Laal, 2011). Lifelong learning covers formal education, non-formal education and informal education that a learner can learn at all stages of the life cycle (e.g. school, work, retirement etc.) and can learn themselves throughout their lifetimes (Buntat et al., 2013; Drigas and Tsolaki, 2015).

A learning community concept can be defined as a group of people who are aware of the importance of and the need for learning as it will improve thinking, analyzing, problem-solving skills and knowledge (Arden et al., 2008). Such skills and knowledge can be utilized to create value-added and/or innovation. A learning community plays an important role in, firstly, strengthening a local economy and developing a community, secondly, creating a participatory learning process that focuses on learning outside the classroom, thirdly, building balance of use and conservation of natural resources for sustainable development, fourthly, maintaining and enhancing the potentiality of local knowledge and, lastly, establishing a network and cooperation for knowledge management and sharing. A potential and successful learning community consists of a good leader, ethical committees and effective management (e.g. collaboration, knowledge storage system, appropriate use of knowledge and building internal and external collaborative networks) (Puttikosa, 2011).

From the two concepts above, the definition of a lifelong learning community would be described as a group that gathers people who demand for lifelong learning where members can collaboratively work and learn something properly for life quality development or problem-solving of themselves and others. The participation of members can be boosted by giving a space for criticizing, debating and reflective thinking discussion to achieve the common goals (Finsterwald et al., 2013). The principle of a lifelong learning community is the participation of members in operational processes. This encourages and supports members to collaboratively learn from and share what they have with others as well as applying new ideas and information to problem solving and solutions (Stoll et al., 2006). The exchange in learning process fosters an individual learning ability in term of speed and quality, leading to success and goal achievement of individual, community, society and nation.

Many exiting researches found the elements of a learning community in its specific context, however, there is an absence of study on the context of the elements of lifelong learning community development. Therefore, this research aims to study the context of lifelong learning community development. Having researched the relevant literature and synthesize the elements of lifelong learning, the research framework contained six elements as follow.

1) Main Goal means community vision and co-creation of value with a basis of mutual understanding (Chaichaowarat et al., 2015; Chookamnerd et al., 2014; Wongyai, 2015).

2) Community Members means people who liberally join together in a community. Such a community can be in any form, formal or informal, small or big, but its members must have common goals. Also, the leadership skills would be transferred among members of a collaborative community. Plus, a director would always support and facilitate the community operation (Cherngchow, 2008; Hord, 2009; Tahir et al., 2013).

3) Learning Process and Characteristics means knowledge, information or innovation sharing within a community, an organization or a department (Arden et al., 2008; Cherngchow, 2008; Puttikosa, 2011; Tahir et al., 2013).

4) Internal and External Support means aids from members of the community and people outside the community respectively. Internal support includes environmental management to facilitate members the location and

schedule for a meeting, discussing, sharing and learning. External support includes a policy, infrastructure, budget and resources that foster the operation of the community (Chookamnerd et al., 2014; Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education, 2010; Tahir et al., 2013).

5) Operation Evaluation means tracking and monitoring changes occurring from collaborative learning processes of the community (Arden et al., 2008; Sungsi, 2013).

6) Building Lifelong Learning Community Network means establishing a network to share information, knowledge and innovation within a community, an organization or a department and also across other communities (Arden et al., 2008; Kilpatrick et al., 2003; Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education, 2010).

The six elements above which derived from the literature review will be used as a framework for the context study of lifelong learning community development.

Methodology

This study of the context of lifelong learning community development applied qualitative research. Structured interview was employed as a tool to collect data from members of the mentioned lifelong learning communities in Thailand. Such data were analyzed using content analysis.

Participants

The criteria of selecting three communities to be the studied cases of this research were, firstly, being an organization, a community or a department that aims to continuously support knowledge development or solve problem(s) where it is operated more than five years, secondly, being an organization, a community or a department that has been accepted at the national level for the performance of its operation and, finally, being an organization, a community or a department that is willing to provide data for the research purpose. From the criteria above, there were three communities selected as the studied cases, named Puparn Royal Development Study Centre, Sakon Nakhon, (Puparn RDSC), Small and Micro Community Enterprise Doichang Macadamianut, Chiang Rai, (SMCE Doichang Macadamianut) and Teacher Professional Learning Community at Satit Pattana School, Bangkok, (TPLC at Satit Pattana School). The key information persons from each community are the director and officers of Puparn RDSC, totaling 8 people, the founder, president and members of SMCE Doichang Macadamianut, totaling 3 people, and the school director and teachers of TPLC at Satit Pattana School, totaling 4 people.

Data Collection

The research procedure was begun by studying relevant literature, then synthesizing the elements of lifelong learning communities to find a research framework and to construct a structured interview. Such a structured interview has been examined on the content validity by seven experts from various fields, including lifelong learning community, professional learning community, non-formal education and research methodology.

The interview was conducted using three structured interviews which contain open-ended questions covering the six elements, namely 1) Main Goal, 2) Community Members, 3) Learning Process and Characteristics, 4) Internal and External Support, 5) Operation Evaluation and 6) Building Lifelong Learning Community Network. The data collection process started by contacting the key information persons to make an appointment for an interview and, then, issuing a letter for formal confirmation. After that, such an interview would be carried out to collect data. After getting data from the interview, it would be checked for completion to prepare for further steps.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the structured interview data of this qualitative study employed content analysis to examine the consistency and to interpret and synthesize the obtained data. Finally, the conclusion for research findings was being drawn.

Results

The purpose of this research is to study the context of lifelong learning community development from three communities, namely Puparn RDSC, SMCE Doichang Macadamianut and TPLC at Satit Pattana School, the findings from context study of these six elements were as follows:

1) Main Goal of these three lifelong learning communities was identical where the determination of the community's main goal arose from the needs to solve local problems. However, the main goals varied with the backgrounds of the communities. It revealed that Puparn RDSC focused on developing their researches to find and share new agriculture knowledge. While, the main goal of SMCE Doichang Macadamianut was to solve environmental problems such as opium and shifting cultivations. Whereas, TPLC at Satit Pattana School aimed to solve teaching problems and develop a teaching model. It can be seen that the main goals, in general, were knowledge development, finding good practices to solve issues for their communities on many levels (personal, society and environment) and life quality enhancement.

2) Community Members of the three were in common as the community's participants consisted of volunteering internal personnel and external people because they were aware of the benefit and value gained from experience sharing and collaborative learning. Members of Puparn RDSC consisted of scholars, government officials and agriculturists who want to associate in knowledge sharing. While, members of SMCE Doichang Macadamianut were related parties who need knowledge sharing for career development. Whereas, TPLC at Satit Pattana School consisted of the school's personnel, academicians, university lecturers and folk philosophers. These members from internal and external had faith and understanding of common goals and they worked together as a team, learnt and shared knowledge and moved together in the same direction.

3) Learning Process and Characteristics of these three communities were consistent. The processes begun from local problems occurred and then the communities collaboratively learnt and found solutions for the problems. The main learning method of Puparn RDSC was research experiments which aimed to explore new knowledge and share it with people. Then the community and these people could apply these findings into various usages. While, SMCE Doichang Macadamianut focused on practicing and learning from experiences methods. Whereas, TPLC at Satit Pattana School used the learning method of collaborative lesson study which consisted of 5 steps (Plan, Do, See, Reflection and Re-design). The above methods gave solutions which would, then, be shared among members in the community. These gains were further developed into knowledge, attitude and practical skills. Besides, community members were keen to share this knowledge with others.

4) Internal and External Support from members of the communities were believed to be the main factors to successful operation by these three communities. Thus, the communities focused on building strong internal support, especially promoting human capital development. Plus, communication between members was a core to make good understanding as well as giving members space and opportunity to discuss and involve in an activity.

5) Operation Evaluation of these three communities was conducted by having either formal or informal meetings regularly to continuously analyze and follow-up on members' performance. Also, it was a good opportunity for members to give their opinions on the community's performance. In case there was any problem, the decision on a solution would be collaboratively made during the meeting. Puparn RDSC conducted an operation evaluation via meeting every month. While, SMCE Doichang Macadamianut evaluated their operational performance at least once a year and accordingly informed their members. Whereas, TPLC at Satit Pattana School did not have formal a meeting but, instead, they had reflective thinking records from their regular informal meetings and group debates.

6) Building Lifelong Learning Community Network was emphasized by all three communities to illustrate and share good examples of experience sharing and academic development. Puparn RDSC built local networks to induce residents who need knowledge development to participate in the community's training. Similarly, SMCE Doichang Macadamianut created networks with government agencies and educational institution to share research findings, knowledge and experience from cultivation problem-solving and product development. While, TPLC at Satit Pattana School was opened for study tours where others could have an explicit model and practice for teacher professional and educational quality developments.

Discussion

The suggestions from the findings in this research, the context study of lifelong learning community development, were commonly found in many existing researches, some elements, however, were reported in different angles as follow.

1) Main goals of lifelong learning communities found in this study were aimed to solve local problems which were varied by the communities' backgrounds. However, the main goals were about knowledge development, good practices for problem-solving and life quality enhancement. This was consistent with the guidelines for learning development of UNESCO (2003) where it stated that besides the learning for career skills development, the leaning for life sustainability should also be emphasized. The latter was the element of the ability to face and deal with complex problems, such as poverty and environmental issues. In addition, the National Research Council of Thailand (2010) mentioned the principle of a learning community that its operation must be for quality enhancement, capability development and enhancement, and building balance of use and conservation of natural resources for sustainable development under community participation.

2) Lifelong learning community members in this study were both internal and external people who liberally joined in as they needed to gain benefits from collative learning and knowledge and experience sharing about their common interests. Similarly, Wenger et al. (2002) and Tahir et al. (2013) stated that members of a community were those who shared interests and issues or had common interests and those who had a deep understanding and experienced in the practice of such a context. Identically, Chookamnerd et al. (2014) and Wongyai (2015) proposed that all members in a community must have common visions which would connect them together. In addition, Puttikosa (2011) remarked that quality members, who had public consciousness and participated in brainstorming and operating, were the essential components of a leading learning community. Besides, Sommitr (2015) stated that members of a community had different roles to play, but they all had the same important responsibilities which were sharing knowledge and experience and presenting new ideas and solutions in responsible for enhancing the community's efficiency.

3) This research found that the learning process and characteristics of lifelong learning communities started from local problems occurred, then members jointly learnt by conducting research experiment, sharing experience and

knowledge or practicing together to find a solution. Puttikosa (2011) mentioned that a learning community had a learning process which could solve issues and sustainably developed the community. They always learn and develop to find solutions for the problems, and they always transfer knowledge among communities. Besides, Stoll et al. (2006) proposed that collaboration and coordination would encourage better learning for community members.

4) Supports from members were clearly proposed by the result to be the core for the successful communities. Members, including leaders, were the key engine to drive the communities forward. Furthermore, a leader could significantly contribute to a successful lifelong learning community. Chergchow (2008) and Tahir et al. (2013) stated that community leaders who collaboratively involved with their teams would build trust and created positive experiences among the community as members were given opportunities to discuss about their needs and involved in an activity. Collaborative troubleshooting would also build trust among members. In addition, supportive conditions like schedule management and meet-up location, which facilitated members to jointly perform activities such as learning, decision making, problem-solving, and creative work, was a key to maintain the growth and development of a lifelong learning community (Tahir et al., 2013).

5) Evaluation method on community performance found in this study was having either formal or informal meetings regularly to follow-up and analyze their performance. This was also a good opportunity for members to give their opinions and make a decision together. Similarly, Hord (2009) suggested that members should be given a chance to speak at least once a month for the purpose of community development, such as experience and knowledge sharing, discussing and decision making. Maruyama (2009) suggested that organizing a constant meeting was facilitating members a chance to exchange new ideas for knowledge and community development and also it would motivate members to join the discussion. In addition, Sungsi (2013) and Arden et al. (2008) mentioned that a learning community must have monitoring and evaluating process, thus members could learn from it.

6) The finding suggested that the lifelong learning communities underlined the importance of building a network to share and develop good practice and knowledge. Networks were key mechanisms in productive learning between organizations and individuals. There were two types of external networks which were bridging networks (with other communities or professionals working in community development) and linking networks (with people or institutions at different levels of power) (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). Arden et al. (2008) suggested a learning community to build networks with other communities to enhance externality and knowledge-sharing. Also, Sungsi (2013) stated that learning community development must search for affiliate networks to support and run activities. Similarly, Puttikosa (2011) proposed that a learning community should build internal and external networks to collaboratively gain access to capitals, activity, academic, knowledge, market etc. Efficient management of a community network would disperse strong community development across the whole network.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In this study, it has been found that the context of lifelong learning community development had six elements which were 1) Main Goal, 2) Community Members, 3) Learning Process and Characteristics, 4) Internal and External Support, 5) Operation Evaluation and 6) Building Lifelong Learning Community Network. These six components were significant for operating a lifelong learning community. Therefore, the findings in this research can be further utilized in the system development of a lifelong learning community. Consequently, it will enhance the operation of the community to become a strong one where the members have an adaptability skill to cope with changes in the present and also the future.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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