

Information in practice and the building of a “Learning Alliance” in an Irish community

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101

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Abstract

Purpose – Designed as an educational hub for sustainability, the Irish ecovillage of Cloughjordan is dealing with a significant challenge: creating stronger synergies between its educators to maximize its impact on the mainstream. Based on the empirical findings of a study conducted in this community, this paper aims to identify the principal informational and organisational factors that might encourage the development of such synergies.

Design/methodology/approach – Coherently with practice-related and ethnographic methodological principles, data were primarily collected through participant observation and semi-structured, open-ended interviews.

Findings – The lack of collaboration and information sharing between educational practices is relatable to different understandings and meanings about education for sustainability that are amplified by some power asymmetries.

Research limitations/implications – The analysis of the community’s educational practices may have been limited by the many interruptions brought by the recent pandemic.

Originality/value – This is the very first study to explore the educational activities of the ecovillage of Cloughjordan, and one of the first ones to combine the notions of “information in social practice” and “communities of practice” to explore a real-life project.

Keywords Learning processes, Collaboration, Communities of practice, Information sharing, Education for sustainability

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The scale and nature of the transformations required to tackle the major ecological issues of our time point to the need to combine technical solutions and social change – the latter being necessary to lay the grounds for more responsible ways of managing and sharing limited resources (Kirby, 2020; Roy *et al.*, 2018).

On a local scale, intentional communities like ecovillages can embody both aspects very effectively by (1) promoting grassroots innovations (Seyfang and Smith, 2007) and by (2) following principles of local sovereignty, non-hierarchical governance and self-reliance (Campos, 2013; Dawson, 2006). The scholarship supporting this approach to sustainability is very critical of the “one-size-fits-all” strategies envisioned by international development agencies and considers local knowledge and grassroots initiatives as essential guides for policy and action (Boyer *et al.*, 2016; Litfin, 2013; Scruton, 2012; Singh *et al.*, 2019).

Started as a utopian vision of community building, since the 1990s most ecovillages have gradually turned into grassroots experiments on sustainability by focusing their efforts “on developing solutions and practices for community organization, solutions for the management of natural resources, and knowledge generation and sharing” (Singh *et al.*, 2019, p. 241).

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I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the educators of Cloughjordan Ecovillage - especially Davie Philip, Peadar Kirby and Bruce Darrell - and to its entire community. Without their kind and unconditional support, I could have never completed my research project.



Today, many of them act as laboratories of experimentation and learning (Mychajluk, 2017; Papenfuss and Merritt, 2019; Roysen and Cruz, 2020) where education has become “a vital aspect” of their “integrative approach to sustainability” (Litfin, 2013, p. 71). Since the challenges facing these communities are so numerous and complex that most of them don’t survive in the long term (Kirby, 2020; Litfin, 2013), it is essential to identify and understand the factors that can make them more resilient and cohesive over time.

This paper focuses on the educators of the Irish Ecovillage of Cloughjordan (CEV) and on their goal to learn more together to foster collaboration and increase their impact on the transition to more sustainable socioeconomic systems. Founded in 1999 as an educational charity, CEV includes an eco-hostel, an enterprise centre, a farm, an amphitheatre and a set of allotments for growing vegetables. Though this small community of about 130 villagers has faced many organisational and financial issues over the years (especially after the 2008 global crisis), CEV has proven to be a resilient project and a hub of educational excellence. Thanks to sociotechnical and socioeconomic experimentation, CEV stands out as a living, tangible example of the key importance of promoting innovations such as green building, social entrepreneurship and a culture of food based on organic, small-scale production (Papadimitropoulos, 2018). Its key educational actors are represented by VRE, a working group which outlines and implements CEV’s official educational policy; Greenstar, an NGO founded in the 1990s to popularize sustainability and spread solutions based on systems thinking [1]; Raw Loaf (est. 2014), a bakery and baking school pioneering a model of local-scale organic bakeries; and Food For Life (est. 2016), which relies on a successful YouTube channel to convince more and more people to grow their own vegetables by offering first-hand experience as the result of continuous experimentation.

CEV’s educational offer is successful, but fragmented in two principal ways. On the one hand, information sharing for work purposes and active collaboration between all the educators is only occasional. On the other hand, the significant autonomy with which the latter carry out their specific activities hampers the ability to develop an overarching vision of how to improve CEV’s educational impact on the mainstream.

The “Learning Alliance” project, a long-term initiative officially approved by VRE in May 2021, aims to face these challenges by promoting stronger internal ties and synergies, shared values and goals, and mutual accountability. At the time of its launch, however, none of the educators knew precisely how to deal with the two main issues mentioned above. As a researcher who, in that period, was exploring CEV’s ongoing informational activities, I thought the Learning Alliance project might be a significant opportunity to narrow down the focus of my study. The challenge of understanding how to promote mutual learning and closer collaboration between individuals with very different personal backgrounds and views on education stood out immediately as a very interesting problem to consider.

The ethnographically informed study on which this paper is based relies on Wenger’s (1998) communities of practice (CoPs) theory to identify the principal informational and organisational factors that might encourage the development of the Learning Alliance.

Two principal research questions have been addressed:

- (1) What are the main characteristics of CEV’s practices of education for sustainability?
- (2) How should these practices change to encourage the unfolding of the Learning Alliance?

Centred on the second question, this paper is structured as follows. After reviewing how similar research problems and questions have been addressed in the extant literature (Section 2), the theoretical and methodological approach chosen for this study is described and justified in Section 3. Section 4 explains how data were collected, coded and analysed, and some details about the two sets of interviews conducted in the ecovillage are provided. The key findings about two major educational practices taking place in CEV are then presented in Section 5. Analysed in Section 6 in light of the challenges posed by the Learning Alliance project, these

findings are harked back to the theoretical framework and to the extant literature in [Section 7](#). Finally, [Section 8](#) draws some conclusions while pointing out the major limitations of this study.

2. Literature review

CEV's Learning Alliance project's implementation demands to develop a collaborative dimension where information sharing is central. Since the main goal of the project is to strengthen CEV's educational impact on the mainstream, it is key to understand how its educators could learn more from one another.

2.1 Collaboration and information sharing

A commonly used term, "collaboration" can involve "processes, structures, power, authority, rules, resources, expertise, awareness, behaviours, norms, commitment, expectations" ([Pham and Tanner, 2014](#), p. 19).

As complex and multidimensional as it is, such notion defies any straightforward definition or theory ([Jain, 2017](#); [Montiel-Overall, 2005](#)), and it has been often used in various literatures as a synonym of "cooperation" and "partnership" ([Pham and Tanner, 2014](#); [Virkus, 2007](#)). Yet there's a "broad agreement across the disciplines" on depicting collaboration in terms of interdependence, mutuality and commitment to working together to achieve common goals, shared effort, shared responsibility and accountability, shared resources and outcomes, voluntary participation and values such as fairness and caring for others ([Pham and Tanner, 2014](#), p. 19).

When it comes to considering collaboration in education, most Library and Information Studies (LIS) literature centred on schools, universities and libraries ([Pham and Tanner, 2014](#)) sees it as a process "that specifically focuses on the activities of teaching, learning and researching among educational participants" ([Pham and Tanner, 2015](#), p. 3; [Whipple, 1987](#)). The goal is usually to improve teaching and learning practices, develop research skills and enhance the curriculum ([Pham and Tanner, 2014](#)). This way of seeing collaboration in education, quite close to what CEV's Learning Alliance should represent, must be combined with an approach to information sharing that takes into account the need to find some common ground and build shared views.

2.2 A holistic view of information sharing

Factors such as leadership, organisational culture, trust, common beliefs, personality, bureaucratic procedures, physical proximity, power asymmetries and risk/benefit trade-off have often been identified in the LIS literature as influential on information sharing between individuals ([Ahmad and Huvila, 2019](#); [Haeussler, 2011](#); [Kim and Roth, 2011](#); [Pilerot, 2013](#); [Wilson, 2010](#)). As shown by some studies, however, it is hard to make consistent, reliable predictions not only in terms of what can either favour or harness information sharing but also in relation to its positive and negative effects ([Cook et al., 2017](#); [Jain, 2017](#); [Kembro and Näslund, 2014](#); [Pham and Tanner, 2015](#); [Tong and Crosno, 2016](#); [Wang, 2020](#)).

[Ahmad and Huvila \(2019\)](#) argue that this issue can be overcome by acknowledging that the advantages and disadvantages of information sharing *always* depend on contextual and situational factors. In this regard, the work of "deconstruction" made by [Beynon-Davies and Wang \(2019\)](#) is telling. According to them, the central problem with the term "information sharing" is that it relies on a "rather brittle convention of signifying information as stuff that can be manipulated, transmitted, and used in an unproblematic manner both within and between organisations" ([Beynon-Davies and Wang, 2019](#), p. 477). By looking at information sharing from a different angle – as an *accomplishment* performed with and through systematic forms for organising data – [Beynon-Davies and Wang \(2019\)](#) argue that this concept should never be (1) decontextualized, (2) equated with the use of certain technologies or (3) understood through the transmission view ([Carey, 1989](#)) of communication. As previously suggested by [Pilerot and Limberg \(2011\)](#), effective information sharing should be sought in *all* constituent elements of the activities under scrutiny rather than in one or more specific factors.

2.3 Information sharing and CoPs

In its “managerial” version (Wenger *et al.*, 2002), the CoPs framework has often been used in business and academic settings to promote innovation and collaboration, facilitate knowledge management and information sharing, and support growth and change in professional environments (Belzowski *et al.*, 2013). After all, there’s a close relationship – often pointed out in organisational studies (Wilson, 2010) – between CoPs development and effective information sharing (Ahmad and Huvila, 2019; Heinström *et al.*, 2021).

In the specific field of LIS, CoPs have been applied mostly to three main areas: academic libraries, knowledge management and IT. Numerous studies have been successfully conducted either to explore the implementation of CoP-based projects (Attebury *et al.*, 2013; Belzowski *et al.*, 2013; Henrich and Attebury, 2010) or to assess the existence of informal CoPs and their benefits, such as learning in practice and designing more effective library schools experiences (Bilodeau and Carson, 2015). Works such as Hara and Kling (2002), Hara (2007), Gallagher and Mason (2007), Zhang and Watts (2008), Yukawa (2010) and De Jager-Loftus *et al.* (2014) rely specifically on Wenger’s (1998) CoPs theory – focused on learning rather than on management – to explore information uses and needs, but they do so without referring to the quite popular notions of information behaviour and information practices.

It is only fewer studies that actually combine CoPs and information behaviour or practices. Pham and Williamson’s (2018) case study, for example, is focused on the academic and library staff of two universities and addresses the interconnection between information sharing and collaboration through Wenger’s (1998) CoPs theory. The authors consider information sharing as an important area of information behaviour, but they don’t consider its connection with the (fundamental) learning dimension of CoPs. A similar approach has been followed by Slota *et al.* (2022), who explore the information sharing practices of social service providers seen as a CoP as they engage with people experiencing homelessness in the US Austin/Travis County region: though the authors explicitly mention Wenger’s (1998) theory, they don’t address its learning dimension and actually build on Chatman’s (1996) concept of “information poverty” while looking at information sharing from a behavioural standpoint. Mansour (2020) explores how information practices are negotiated within a community over time by focusing on an online multicultural Facebook group of foreign mothers who live in Sweden and share information about parenting practices. In a similar way, Vardell *et al.* (2021) aim to understand the information practices of an online cosplay Facebook group through the use of qualitative methods.

Whilst Mansour (2020), Vardell *et al.* (2021) and Slota *et al.* (2022) use the concept of CoPs (Wenger, 1998) mostly as a background, without unpacking it, Moring (2011) addresses in detail the relationship between CoPs (Wenger, 1998) and information practices seen as the object of the so-called negotiation of meaning (see Section 3). With a focus on a Danish transport company seen as a CoP, this ethnographic study investigates the technical information practices of two newly recruited sales assistants in relation to their ongoing learning process (Moring, 2011, 2017).

Lloyd and Olsson (2019) are concerned with this specific topic, but their ethnographic study, centred on the embodied information practices of a community of car restorers, gives prominence to CoPs’ identity formation (Wenger, 1998), another concept explained in the following section. They define the relationship between such practices and identity construction as “a central one for our field” that “narrower approaches focused on individual information seeking are not equipped to address” (Lloyd and Olsson, 2019, p. 1321). Their conclusion is quite insightful: car restorers prefer the real-life social relations they have personally developed over online resources and networks because, in a sense, they “are not only rebuilding their cars but also their own sense of self” (p. 1311). This backs the idea that information sharing can go well beyond the simple transfer of information (Beynon-Davies and Wang, 2019).

2.4 CoPs and intentional communities

It is only in recent years that CoPs have gained traction among the researchers specifically interested in the learning processes of intentional communities and, in particular, of ecovillages (Mychajluk, 2017).

This very small literature includes studies like those conducted by Cato (2014), Bradbury and Middlemiss (2015) and Burke (2017) on grassroots sustainable community initiatives. Mychajluk (2017), however, stands out for being one of the very first researchers to use CoPs theory (Wenger, 1998) to study how learning takes place in ecovillages. In her case study, she explores how the social competencies needed to live and work together in a Canadian ecovillage are learnt over time: her main argument is that such a learning process – slow, often all-consuming, never-ending and widely supported by community resources and practices – is very important also to obtain “crucial insight into a part of a much broader process of education and learning for a transition to sustainability” (Mychajluk, 2017, p. 191). The study points out, in particular, that the role that power inequality can play within sustainability-related practices shouldn’t be overlooked. In a more recent case study about the German permaculture community, Ulbrich and Pahl-Wostl (2019) claim that Wenger’s (1998) CoPs theory has proved useful to address some internal challenges such as the absence of a common strategy to connect individuals with coordinated activities.

All in all, the extant literature suggests that, in most cases, promoting CoPs development and a “diffused” approach to information sharing can indeed strengthen collaboration by counter-acting the several obstacles (such as irreconcilable cultural differences, heavy workloads and power asymmetries) that could impede its proper development.

3. Theoretical and methodological approach

The idea that the Learning Alliance could be approached as a CoP was originally suggested by one of VRE’s educators: especially in Wenger’s (1998) version, CoPs are indeed primarily concerned with the ability of a given practice to express some commonality through mutual learning [2] (Nicolini, 2012). Yet this wasn’t the only reason for which I opted for a practice-based approach. When the Learning Alliance project was officially launched, I had already concluded that such a perspective was necessary to relate to sustainability as a locally rooted approach “permeating almost all aspects of life and profoundly dependent on the specifics of local contexts” (Boyer *et al.*, 2016, p. 13). Since intentional communities like ecovillages couldn’t achieve their educational goals without reshaping the local practices on which their own everyday activities are founded, practice theories come to the fore as a suitable approach.

Broadly considered as nexus of activities grounded in a specific social, cultural and historical context, practices represent a concept that is too complex to define in a simple and straightforward manner (Nicolini, 2012). Yet it is possible to identify some common ideas and themes that differentiate practice-based approaches from most traditions in social studies:

- (1) Situated, social and relational practices shape human life and determine its social and organisational perpetuation (or change) through organised constellations or patterns of activity and understanding (Schatzki, 2002).
- (2) Knowledge is essentially the ability to master a practice (Nicolini, 2012).
- (3) Bodies, materials, materiality and text/symbols are as relevant as sayings and doings (Orlikowski and Scott, 2015).
- (4) Power, tensions and conflicts are key components of social reality (Nicolini, 2012).
- (5) Traditional dualisms (actor/system, body/mind, subject/object) are rejected as a part of a representationalist tradition (Taylor, 1995) that is meant to be overcome: individual agency becomes thus inseparable from practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Though most practice researchers agree on what highlighted above, the emphasis put on every single point can vary significantly. This is due not only to the differences existing between scholars but also to the fact that practice theories do not represent, altogether, a unified field of study (Nicolini, 2012).

Schatzki's (2002) conceptualisation identifies three main levels at which practices are organised: the most basic components with the same analytical relevance are *doings* and *sayings* (lower level) that combine to create *tasks* (intermediate level), which in turn aggregate to form *projects* at the higher level. Doings, sayings, tasks and projects "hang together" through multiple ongoing actions linked to each other through *practical understanding* (the knowing necessary to master a practice), the *teleoaffective structure* (combining a practice's goals with the emotions and moods associated with it), *general understandings* (what gives a practice its peculiar identity) and *rules* (programmes of action that clarify what to do to orient the future course of activity) (Nicolini, 2012).

As pointed out by Nicolini (2012), Schatzki's (2002) conceptualisation implies that practices are the bedrock of both meaning (being intelligible as something) and identity (being intelligible as someone). What is missing in Schatzki's approach, however, is an articulated explanation of how practices can change over time (Nicolini, 2012). Though moving from very similar assumptions about practice, meaning and identity, Wenger's (1998) CoPs theory does offer a plausible explanation of how such changes take place.

3.1 CoPs: a social theory of learning

Based on the ethnographic study of an insurance company's office and influenced by numerous philosophers (from Bourdieu and Giddens to Wittgenstein and Bruno Latour), Wenger's (1998) very nuanced and articulated theory of CoPs assumes that learning is a "fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing" (p. 3). Hence its pervasive nature. As something that can virtually take place in any domain of human endeavour, learning cannot be reduced to the result of formal teaching, nor can it be seen as a linear process with a beginning and an end (Wenger, 1998).

However, not everything done in practice implies learning. Since CoPs develop exclusively where people (1) engage to do something together (*mutual engagement*), (2) align their activities towards the same goal (*joint enterprise*) and (3) share a variety of material and non-material elements to such purpose (*shared repertoire*), CoPs-related learning (which is always social) takes place exclusively at such levels (Wenger, 1998). And rather than being mostly dependent on the acquisition of information, it is founded on the "negotiation of meaning": CoPs can emerge – and function properly – only if their members are able to (1) identify/appropriate their CoPs' key meanings and (2) share (at least) some of them at the core of what they do together. Learning entails both processes and cannot take place without the constant mediation of meaning (as an experience of everyday life) and power (as the ability to make certain meanings count over others). Since Wenger (1998) sees "meaning" simply as something that stems from the dynamic relation of living in the world (action intelligibility), CoPs' key meanings can be seen as the predominant way in which CoPs members make sense – both socially and practically – of what they do together.

Once identified and appropriated, meanings must be "negotiated" in the sense that practitioners must compromise and find some common ground in order to make both *participation* (their active involvement) and *reification* (the production of tangible objects as the outcome of their practice) not only possible but also sufficiently balanced (Wenger, 1998). Since CoPs' learning is about "getting to know new things" and "becoming someone" within a certain social order at the same time, CoPs theory is more concerned with the social process of negotiating meaning and competence than with the description of a group of people interacting *in situ* (Farnsworth *et al.*, 2016).

While the negotiation of meaning is the social process through which CoPs' members make sense of what their practice is about, identity formation (equally social, but more diachronic)

defines how the single practitioners become members from three distinct standpoints (Wenger, 1998): *engagement*, the active involvement in the negotiation of meaning; *alignment*, the coordination of actions and practices towards a common end; *imagination*, a creative process through which CoPs' members develop new, alternative images of the world. Identity formation is, in turn, the outcome of the interplay between identification and negotiability (Wenger, 1998). While *identification* defines the meanings that matter the most to every single member, *negotiability*, founded on relations of legitimacy and power, is the ability to affect, control and shape such meanings (Wenger, 1998). Similarly to participation and reification, identification and negotiability constitute a duality: without identification, there wouldn't be any meanings to negotiate; without negotiability, identification would be powerless (Wenger, 1998).

The close connection established by Wenger (1998) between learning, meaning and identity is an elaboration on Lave and Wenger's (1991) view of learning as a process dependent on issues of power and normativity. The greater the ability to appropriate meanings, the stronger the power to define competence: it is only through meaning and power that it's possible to understand how CoPs change over time (Wenger, 1998).

Despite the undeniable importance granted to identity formation, it is essential to notice that Wenger's (1998) entry point of analysis is always practice, not the single practitioner. This is what Nicolini (2012) defines a "strong" practice-based approach to distinguish it from the representationalist studies that explore practices without putting individual agency aside.

3.2 Information in social practice

Though Wenger (1998) doesn't provide any advice about how to account for information use and sharing, he does show that these activities are *subordinated* to the negotiation of meaning and identity formation. This has significant epistemological implications pertaining to the use of the information practice framework. As shown in Section 2, various studies have combined CoPs and information practices with different goals. Yet, as argued by Cox (2012), the individualistic notions still lying beneath the concept of "information practices" can represent an obstacle to the actual incorporation of the strong practice-based approach demanded by Wenger (1998): the risk of conflating incompatible epistemologies like those lying behind behaviour and practice cannot be ignored (Shove, 2010).

Such issues have suggested the adoption of Cox's (2012) concept of "information in social practice", based on the central idea that "what is information is specific to a practice" (p. 184). The example provided by family photography is very helpful to clarify this view:

Although the information the photos contain is important to their use, one would hesitate to see family photography as an "information practice". It is clearly more to do with building togetherness than with seeking or sharing information. (...) How the photo is used as information (whether it is understood using that term, and its nature as information) is highly coloured by the specific practice. (Cox, 2012, p. 185)

By shifting the focus of analysis from how practitioners "deal with information" (Savolainen, 2007) to what is actually informative to the practice under scrutiny, Cox's notion emphasises two central points: (1) most, if not all, social practices include relevant information activities even if they aren't centred on them, and this is even truer today thanks to the widespread adoption of ICTs; (2) the nature of such activities is determined by the particular character of the practice. It follows that "if a practice shapes what information is and how it is used, changes in the practice will reshape what counts as information" (Cox, 2013, p. 71). From a CoPs theory (Wenger, 1998) perspective, it can thus be argued that something is informative to a given practice *to the extent to which it is relevant to the negotiation of meaning* through which this practice expresses some degree of commonality.

Going back to CEV's project, it becomes evident that studying how the single participants seek, use and share information is not sufficient to understand how information could support

more effectively the development of the Learning Alliance: it is also necessary to look at information (whatever it represents to CEV's practices of education for sustainability) as a *factor fuelling the interplay between participation and reification*. Whilst "reified" information is easy to imagine (from the notes taken during a meeting to the exchange of documents and online messages), "participative" information is subtler to grasp because of the tacit dimension it always entails. Apart from verbal exchanges, there are many unarticulated aspects – from embodied understandings to various types of intuition or sensitivity – that can prove informative to the negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998). ICTs simply provide additional ways of engaging with people which can be both participative and reified: while the former implies the mediation of social interaction (a conversation on Zoom, for example), the latter leads to the production of digital objects like messages and videos (Wenger, 1998).

4. Data collection and analysis

CEV is part of an extensive network of actors and partners which includes the Irish Environmental Network and the Global Ecovillage Network. Yet it's only the very small group of CEV's educators (just 10 in 130 residents) to be at the forefront of the innovations and teaching activities designed and developed here.

Primary data collection was therefore centred on (though not limited to) this small group, while the project was methodologically informed by some ethnographic principles such as (1) bringing to the fore the complexity of locally contextualised sociocultural life, (2) interpreting a setting from the viewpoint of those who inhabit it by participating in their everyday or working lives for extended periods of time and (3) considering not only people's actions and accounts but also their material surroundings (Blommaert and Jie, 2010; Coffey, 2018; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

As a form of social and educational research suitable to study human and non-human actors in their everyday context (Hammersley, 2006), ethnography doesn't have the same analytical focus of practice theories (Nicolini, 2017), but its methods can be (and have been) extended to the study of practices (Lloyd and Olsson, 2019; Moring, 2011; Nicolini, 2012). Often associated with ethnography, participant observation, field notes and semi-structured, open-ended interviews have been chosen as the main methods of data collection (Hammersley, 2006; LeCompte and Schensul, 2010).

4.1 Sampling

During the first phase of data collection (August–December 2020), aiming to explore information sharing against the background of the ecovillage's sociocultural context, CEV's population was sampled by selecting the participants I came across by virtue of the role they played in the community, and then by adopting a "snowball" approach. 17 interviews (15 in-person and 2 online) were conducted with 16 people (educators, members of CEV and Cloughjordan's residents).

In the second phase (May–July 2021), focused on the Learning Alliance project, the interviewees were selected to create a "panel of informants" – that is to say, "a collection of people in touch with one another but not as closely linked as those in an organization" (Weiss, 1994, p. 19). Only those who could be qualified as educators by virtue of their competences and experience were included: 14 in-depth face-to-face interviews were carried out in the ecovillage with 11 people. In both phases, every interview was digitally recorded and transcribed *verbatim* (see Tables 1 and 2).

Secondary data (websites, magazine and newspaper articles, official documents and leaflets) were collected to obtain some historical and background information (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). Finally, the body of scientific work already existing on the ecovillage was essential to obtain a more nuanced understanding of CEV's development and issues.

Table 1. Exploratory interviews: the interviewees and their roles

Name	Description/role	Duration
Amy	Employee involved in education; CEV's co-founder, member and resident for about 10 years	48 min (1st) 45 min (2nd)
Agnes (with Sean)	Independent educator, activist, artist, CEV's collaborator for more than 2 years; Cloughjordan resident for about 2 years	1 h
Charles	University teacher, professional, educator, facilitator; CEV's member and resident for more than 10 years	45 min
Elizabeth (online)	Professional; former activist; CEV's member and resident for more than 10 years	45 min
Jasmine	Professional involved in education; CEV's member and resident for almost 10 years	1 h 14 min
Jim	CEV farm's employee involved in educational activities	45 min
Judith	Professional and former activist; CEV's co-founder, member, and resident for more than 10 years	1 h 30 min
Kenneth (online)	Retired professor and educator; CEV's member and resident for more than 10 years	1 h 25 min
Nadine	Professional with a strong interest in ecological issues; CEV's member and resident for more than 10 years	1 h
Peggy	Professional interested in ecological issues; CEV's member and resident for about 10 years	50 min
Sarah	Entrepreneur; CEV's collaborator and Cloughjordan resident for almost 10 years	47 min
Sean (with Agnes)	Independent educator; activist; CEV's collaborator for more than 5 years; Cloughjordan resident for about 15 years	1 h
Tom and Patricia	Entrepreneurs and educators; CEV's members and residents for more than 10 years	1 h 10 min
Vivian	Employee involved in education; CEV resident (but not a member) for almost 10 years	53 min

Source(s): Author's own work

4.2 Analysis, coding, ethics

The analysis of primary and secondary data was conducted with three main goals in mind: (1) reconstructing the main practices of education for sustainability that take place in CEV, (2) evaluating the potential of such practices to perform some commonality in a CoP and (3) identifying the conditions that might favour the development of a Learning Alliance between CEV's educators. The main educational practices were identified and described in detail [3] by relying on the four elements (practical understanding, teleoaffective structure, general understandings and rules) theorised by [Schatzki \(2002\)](#). And since practices, by definition, do not have boundaries ([Nicolini, 2012](#)), it wasn't possible to identify either a "beginning" or an "end" for any of them.

With the support of the software NVivo12, both primary and secondary data were coded on three different (but interconnected) levels: sociocultural context, practices of education for sustainability and potential CoPs of educators. While the coding schemes of the first two levels informed and shaped the findings, the coding scheme pertaining to the third level was essential to articulate their analysis and discussion. By following the classification proposed by [Saldaña \(2016\)](#), five types of coding – descriptive, In Vivo, values, emotion and provisional – were used. From an initial set of five broad codes ("socio-cultural context", "education for sustainability", "organisation & governance" and "social sustainability") more specific categories were identified by selecting 10 major codes, 70 subcodes and 91 sub-subcodes ([Coffey and Atkinson, 1996](#)).

All UCD standards of ethical conduct – meant to protect the rights of research participants while minimising the risks to which they may be exposed – were applied to the study in terms

Table 2. Focused interviews: the interviewees and their roles

Name	Description/role	Duration
Agnes	Independent educator; activist; artist; CEV's collaborator for more than 2 years; Cloughjordan resident for about 2 years	53 min
Charles	University teacher; professional; educator; facilitator; CEV's member and resident for more than 10 years	52 min
Jordan	Professional; entrepreneur; educator; former activist; CEV's member and resident for more than 10 years	2 h (1st) 2 h (2nd)
Kenneth	Retired professor and educator; CEV's member and resident for more than 10 years	57 min
Max	Educator and facilitator; CEV's co-founder and member, but resident in Cloughjordan for almost 10 years	1 h 30 min (1st) 58 min (2nd) 40 min (3rd)
Ned	Professional and educator; CEV's collaborator for about 6 years; Cloughjordan resident	48 min
Nell	Entrepreneur; professional; educator; CEV's member for almost 20 years, but currently resident in Cloughjordan	2 h
Paul	Entrepreneur and educator; CEV's co-founder and member, but resident in Cloughjordan	55 min
Sean	Independent educator; activist; CEV's collaborator for more than 5 years; Cloughjordan resident for about 15 years	52 min
Tom and Patricia	Entrepreneurs and educators; CEV's members and residents for more than 10 years	1 h 45 min

Source(s): Author's own work

of design and execution. UCD ethics guidelines were also used to create the consent form for the interviews.

5. Findings

5.1 A leading centre for place-based education

As the Primary Activity Group devoted to education, *VRE (Village Research and Education)* is the official branch through which the ecovillage pursues its educational goals. Activities are regularly discussed, planned and organised in accordance to VRE's official principles and goals (VERT, 2021) by relying on a wide set of documents, minutes and other resources. Stored and shared online, these documents are accessible to all members, who can freely comment and make amendments on equal terms.

Education as "walk the talk" – The dominant meaning attached to this practice is making CEV a more and more distinguished educational hub for innovation and education on sustainability: in this regard, community building and place-based education are seen as the starting point of sociotechnical and socioeconomic innovation for sustainability. As "lived" by VRE's members, education for sustainability is emerging as a form of place-based education which some in the community define "walk the talk". Whilst in schools and academia, people usually sit in a classroom and listen to a speaker with whom they may or may not interact ("talk the talk"), ecovillages grant learners the opportunity to walk around and see real-life examples of implemented solutions for sustainability. Hence the centrality granted to collaborations with school, universities and external researchers and the importance attributed to the tours of the ecovillage.

Putting in writing to inform – Information is sought and shared through a regular flow of emails, agendas, plans, minutes and other shared documents to feed the negotiation of meaning in the first place. What is most informative to VRE's educational practice is what is put in writing with regard to the various activities and events planned and delivered throughout the

year. ICT-mediated, reified information in social practice tends therefore to be dominant. As it is being acted upon today within VRE, however, information in social practice doesn't serve properly the development of commonality, for it stresses reification over participation. This helps to understand why learning in practice is taking place more in terms of a shared repertoire (through documents, plans, minutes, etc.) and of a joint enterprise (through rule-based alignment and accountability) than in terms of mutual engagement between VRE's members.

5.2 First-hand experience as the starting point of learning

Food for Life (FFL) is a for-profit enterprise which uses some of the ecovillage's allotments to test alternative methods of growing vegetables at a small scale and regularly shares the results of these experimentations on a popular YouTube channel. With a highly focused educational scope, FFL (1) teaches what it does in its everyday work, (2) ties its local activities to a global network (production is local, but ideas are exchanged globally) and (3) offers an excellent example of sociotechnical and socioeconomic innovation. Thanks to its main purpose – spreading a more sustainable model of food production – this profit-based business model positions itself at the frontier between the market and the social economy (the former being driven by profit, the latter by social needs).

Education as “talk by doing” – According to FFL's owner, a Canadian architect and former climate activist become a food security expert, education for sustainability should naturally stem from the unfolding of specific practices. In other words, “you teach about what you are doing, not about what you are only theorizing”:

In my work, I try to answer some key questions: how to grow effectively a lot of vegetables? What are the design principles to follow? What are the things to take into account? What should one be trying to achieve? My videos are all based on what I am *currently* doing and experiencing, on what is *currently* happening – not on ideas or things I did in the past.

The key meaning of this practice is therefore about (1) showing and explaining the successes and failures of experimenting new methods of growing food and (2) offering concrete examples based on first-hand experience: an approach whose efficacy is measured by the number of people who, as a result, start growing vegetables on their own.

The difference between “walk the talk” and “talk by doing” is, however, more than just pedagogical:

The idea of labelling an area as “educational”, and then building on it accordingly, is concept-driven. On the contrary, clustering multiple activities around a given space, and then introducing educational activities and demonstrations on top of that is driven by doing.

In sum, the central meaning relatable to the practice carried out by FFL puts education for sustainability on top of existing practices. This approach tends to give more prominence to reification, but not in the same way in which this happens for VRE. The latter emphasises reification (mostly in the form of digital documents) to guarantee mutual accountability and the degree of formality expected from the “educational arm” of CEV. On the contrary, FFL intensively uses reification (mostly in the form of digital messages and videos) to foster learning and participation (see [Table 3](#)).

What is most informative to FFL's educational practice comes directly from the empirical results of its own experimentations and from the exchange of messages on social platforms. Meetings, official documents and emails are secondary (sometimes even marginal) in comparison with sources like the online conversations taking place on FFL's YouTube channel and the smartphone used to collect other information and produce educational videos.

In its current form, information in social practice is primarily concerned with continuous sociotechnical improvement. The kind of participation it contributes to engender (people across the world exchanging ideas and experiences about best practices to produce organic food) is somehow looser, but much broader than that specifically required to develop CoPs ([Wenger, 1998](#)).

Table 3. Information and meaning across CEV’s key educational practices

Main educational practices	Central meanings	Information in social practice
VRE	<p>“Walk the talk”: showing what has been done; focus on achievements <i>Making CEV a distinguished educational hub for innovation and education on sustainability</i> Education formally organised as an activity on its own <i>Social economy: social purpose, no profit</i></p>	<p>What is formally put in writing about the activities and events planned and delivered throughout the year <i>Reified information prevails in the form of documents and emails</i></p>
Greenstar	<p>“Walk the talk”: showing what has been done; focus on achievements <i>Bringing people together to popularize systems thinking</i> Education formally organised as an activity on its own <i>Social economy: social purpose, no profit</i></p>	<p>Occasional chats, meetings, events, emails, social networks, official documents, artefacts – and anything supporting (1) the ideation, organisation and delivery of courses and events, and (2) the identification of new projects and collaborations <i>Balance between participative and reified information</i></p>
Raw loaf and FFL	<p>“Talk by doing”: showing what is being done; focus on both achievements and failures <i>Relying on specific socio-technical and socio-economic practices to promote the transition to sustainability and support community building</i> Education stemming from existing practices (baking bread, growing vegetables) <i>Market and Social economy: profit subordinated to social purposes</i></p>	<p>Empirical results of direct experimentation; social networks and other technological tools <i>Reified information prevails in the form of messages and videos posted on social platforms</i></p>

Source(s): Author’s own work

6. Pathways and obstacles to the Learning Alliance

The two examples above have been selected among others to show the extent to which CEV’s educators can embody and perpetuate widely different approaches not only to education *per se* but also to the ways in which the latter is intertwined with the development of the whole ecovillage project. Some educators are more generalists, others essentially specialists. Some follow pedagogies similar to those applied in schools and universities, others are more radical and argue the primacy of “doing” over “talking”. Some tend to focus their teaching on the successes achieved, others on mistakes and failures. How could it be possible to effectively conflate such activities into a cohesive Learning Alliance? Wenger’s (1998) CoPs theory suggests to consider how learning together might eventually lead to a shared educational practice capable of performing some degrees of commonality. And it is here that the notions of identity formation and meaning’s negotiation (Wenger, 1998) come into play. On the one hand, the negotiation of meaning is an ongoing process that allows to understand *why* practitioners are mutually engaged in the first place, and how they are learning together. On the other hand, identity formation is a “trajectory of learning” depicting *how* such carriers have come to express some commonality over time – and how they could do even more so in the future. Hence the importance of power, one of the decisive factors to determine and change the meanings at the core of any practice. Power and meaning are always intertwined across time: without meaning, there wouldn’t be anything to negotiate; without power, there would be just a set of multiple, non-negotiable meanings (Wenger, 1998).

Since identity formation is particularly concerned with changes over time, the three factors behind it – imagination, engagement and alignment (Wenger, 1998) – have been used to analyse the concrete feasibility of the Alliance.

6.1 *The double-edged sword of imagination*

Imagination is a powerful double-edged sword in the sense that the “pictures of the world” it enables across space and time (both the past and the future) can either unite or divide (Wenger, 1998). Ecovillages like CEV are great examples of the power to (re)imagine the future by bringing people together. As put by Max, “if it wasn’t for the ten or so people who came together at the start and imagine a different place, all of this would have never happened”. Yet, imagination is not just a factor of *positive* identification. By constantly playing “with participation and non-participation, inside and outside, the actual and the possible, the doable and the unreachable, the meaningful and the meaningless” (Wenger, 1998, p. 178), imagination can also generate tensions and disengagement. This is true for the past (should we focus on its achievements or also on its mistakes?) as well as for the future (what are the educational aspects which should be developed the most?).

For imagination to be truly relevant to the development of the Learning Alliance, power need to be more evenly distributed among CEV’s educators. The fact that only few of them – VRE’s members – can formally define the educational policies and goals of CEV makes their key meanings and approaches to education for sustainability much more influential at this level.

6.2 *Loose engagement*

Looking at CEV’s educators as a whole, their current mutual engagement is quite loose for the simple reason that they are part of separate practices with distinct features, objectives and meanings. Direct interactions for common educational purposes remain sparse, and they never involve all the practices at the same time and for the same goals. Always partial and often irregular, the current degree of engagement doesn’t require intense information sharing. It is only through the identification and negotiation of converging meanings that the educators could become more mutually engaged.

6.3 *The difficult balance between allegiance and compliance*

As a dimension which pertains to the coordination of the energies, perspectives and actions necessary to pursue a common goal, alignment is always concerned with power because it often needs to strike a balance between allegiance and compliance (Wenger, 1998). While the former – founded on trust, inspiration and motivation – can be an essential source of meaning for engagement, the latter implies the introduction of rules and procedures that constrain the actions and autonomy of participants (Wenger, 1998). In the current context of CEV, where the degree of engagement between the totality of the educators is very limited, the development of the Alliance should certainly rely more on compliance than on allegiance to sustain alignment over time. Whenever compliance prevails over allegiance, however, the risk is to weaken participation while strengthening reification (such as written agreements on how to deliver education).

For alignment to stem from allegiance, at least two conditions should be met: rebalancing power among the educators and transforming the Alliance into a bottom-up project embraced by all the educators.

6.4 *Harnessing information in social practice*

To be significant at all, information in social practice must have a concrete impact both in the short term (on the negotiation of meaning) and in the long period (on identity formation and, thus, on power). A starting point for analysis has been identified not only in the current

connections between information and meaning across the principal educational practices but also in imagination as the most powerful vehicle for identification.

What might become most informative to the educational practices increasingly involved in the Alliance could be represented, for example by (1) the shared histories of learning of the educators; (2) the strengths and weaknesses of their previous collaborations and (3) the similarities, divergences and complementarities already existing between the meanings at the core of such practices.

7. Discussion

The findings show that the four main educational practices coexisting in CEV differ from one another in ways that go well beyond their practical understandings (Schatzki, 2002). Not only are these practices founded on core meanings that diverge in substantial ways: they don't entail the same degree of power within CEV either, and they don't singularly express the same degree of commonality because of heterogeneous levels of participation and reification.

The coexistence of two distinct forms of general understandings (Schatzki, 2002) – “walk the talk” and “talk by doing” – implies very diverse modalities of information in social practice (Cox, 2012). Together with sparse collaboration, this helps to explain that the current lack of information sharing is a *consequence*, rather than a *cause*, of poor cooperation between educators. While Schatzki's (2002) framework suggests that long-established practices can't easily overlap if they are founded on very different understandings, Wenger's (1998) CoPs theory indicates that such practices can jointly perform the commonality needed by the Learning Alliance only if they are able to negotiate their respective meanings on equal grounds.

7.1 The centrality of meaning and power

Wenger's (1998) approach maintains that aggregating contents, sharing information and coordinating activities cannot pave the way to a proper Alliance if meaning- and power-related issues aren't effectively addressed. This has been substantially confirmed not only by the findings presented above but also by scholars such as Lloyd and Olsson (2019) or Giustini (2022). When they observe that the relationship between information practices and identity construction “is a central one for our field” (p. 1321), Lloyd and Olsson (2019) are actually stressing the key role played by meaning within CoPs' learning processes. Information practices are important because they support “trajectories of learning” actually driven by meaning and its negotiation. As for Giustini (2022), her ethnographic study of a group of interpreters argues that power is deeply tied to the situated nature of practice: “it is the organisation of practices – competencies, materials, meanings, rules (Schatzki, 2002; Nicolini, 2012) – that coalesces in particular ways and shapes power before it is performed” (p. 14). As long as these elements are left untouched, power relations cannot be transformed by information sharing alone. The gradual unfolding of the Learning Alliance would therefore require some significant changes in CEV's educational practices – not only in how they are carried out but also in how they are currently organised.

Though many of the obstacles to collaboration mentioned in the LIS literature – from bureaucratic procedures to heavy workloads and lack of resources (Jain, 2017; Nikiforos *et al.*, 2020; Pham and Tanner, 2015; Tuamsuk and Nguyen, 2022) – are significant also for the Learning Alliance project, it is power asymmetries between people with different professional backgrounds to stand out (Mychajluk, 2017). As argued by Pham and Tanner (2015), the huge challenges that such asymmetries pose to collaboration can be overcome only by working together and developing some form of mutual understanding. Apart from building on minor achievements to support gradual changes (Pham and Tanner, 2014), what seems to count the most is the adoption of bottom-up approaches meant to favour the emergence of spontaneous partnerships (Pham and Tanner, 2015).

The findings about CEV also suggest that the existence of shared meanings can be essential for effective information sharing, associated in the literature with several factors (information value, leadership, trust, personality, proximity, risk/benefit trade-off) that can affect it in different ways (Ahmad and Huvila, 2019; Cansoy, 2017; Kim and Roth, 2011; Pilerot, 2013; Wilson, 2010). The type of information sharing on education that really matters to CEV is indeed mostly relatable to the natural convergence of different trajectories of learning. The findings also back what was argued by scholars such as Pham and Tanner (2015) or Ahmad and Huvila (2019): that information sharing shouldn't systematically be linked either to singled-out causes or to predetermined advantages and disadvantages.

7.2 A note on the theoretical framework

The combination of Schatzki's (2002), Wenger's (1998) and Cox's (2012) theoretical frameworks has allowed to analyse problems similar to those addressed, in the LIS literature, by scholars such as Moring (2011, 2017), Lloyd and Olsson (2019) and Mansour (2020). Yet, it is essential to notice that, whilst those studies keep their analytical focus on information-centred practices, I have combined information practices (descriptive level) and information in social practice (analytical level) as a possible way to take Wenger's (1998) theory's epistemological approach into account.

Information in social practice can be more insightful than information practices if the goal is to understand what is more informative to the meanings and identities of participation required by CoPs' development. By linking the single practitioners' central meanings to how they deal with information, this notion well suits CoPs theory's (Wenger, 1998) assumption that it is the negotiation of meaning, rather than the acquisition of information and skills, that lies at the core of any significant learning experience.

8. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the main educational practices taking place in the Irish Ecovillage of Cloughjordan (CEV), and of the way in which they could converge into a Learning Alliance to spread innovation for sustainability more effectively, I have suggested that information in social practice (Cox, 2012) and Wenger's (1998) CoPs theory can be jointly used to address the Alliance's main challenges.

The main point is that information in social practice should be used to "open" the negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998) between all the educators in order for them to (1) become more mutually aware of the nature, characteristics, and purposes of their respective educational practices; (2) clarify to each other the meanings which matter the most to them – including what they consider primarily informative to their work; (3) acknowledge that such meanings entail differences that must be mutually accepted, understood and – whenever necessary – negotiated; (4) freely and openly discuss what works, and what doesn't work, across the various educational activities of CEV; (5) share, implement and test "on the ground" ideas, projects and initiatives that could strengthen their engagement and alignment in the pursuit of common goals. It is shared meanings on education negotiated on equal grounds, rather than rules or some abstract intent to collaborate and learn together, which should constitute the very foundation of a bottom-up, collective endeavour to develop the Learning Alliance. The adoption of a strong practice-based epistemology (practices as the entry point of analysis) helps to address the central issues of meaning and power in a more coherent and effective way, and at this level, information in social practice seems to work quite well as an analytical tool – especially when combined with CoPs theory (Wenger, 1998).

Further research is needed to test in different contexts this theory's ability to show how information in social practice can either support or hamper the development of commonality in terms of meaning (why should we engage with one another?) and power (how can we align on equal grounds to achieve common goals?). Despite the popularity gained over the years by the

managerial version of CoPs theory (Wenger *et al.*, 2002), future LIS studies might benefit from the interpretive potential of Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning. Further empirical studies should be conducted as well to seek new ways of combining information and practice. Foundational to the LIS field, codified cognitive knowledge cannot smoothly accommodate the logic of practice theories (Buckland, 2012; Cox, 2012; Wright, 2014). What has been attempted in this study is only an effort in a new direction that needs further reflection and exploration.

8.1 Limitations

Any attempt to translate practices into words can be successful only in part because of their inherent complexity and the tacit dimension they always entail (Nicolini, 2012; Pilerot and Limberg, 2011). Given that the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted my fieldwork many times, it is also important to acknowledge that my ability to render the richness of CEV's educational activities might have been partially jeopardised.

Notes

1. According to systems thinking, "the essential properties of an organism, or living system, are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have" (Capra, 1997, p. 29).
2. By making clear that "the 'community' in the expression [community of practice] is, if anything, a form of commonality performed by the practice and not vice versa" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 94), it is possible to avoid granting excessive prominence to a controversial term like "community", which is hard to define and often suggests positive overtones (Nicolini, 2012).
3. For lack of space, this part of the findings appears in this paper in a very shortened form.

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