

An Overlapping Broad Interface (OBI) Zone: A case study of Japanese language learner's participation process in a Communities of Practice (CoP) and a Networked CoP (NCoP)*

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss how an Overlapping Broad Interface zone (OBI zone) can support a learner to participate in a Community of Practice (CoP) and a network of communities. A CoP is “a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p. 4). In situated learning, learning process implies participation process. The OBI zone can help the learning process. The OBI zone is defined as an area that overlaps the inside and outside of a CoP, where members and non-members can interact with each other (Shimasaki, 2012). It greatly facilitates the participation of potential members and helps to keep the CoP active.

At the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the Japanese community is formed by many smaller communities, such as the language classroom communities, the research students' community, and the teaching community. These smaller communities are interlinked and interact with each other. The network of communities works as a CoP so that it is referred to as a Networked CoP (NCoP) in this paper. The focus of this study is on one of the CoPs within UNSW, namely the Nippon Students Association (NSA). The NSA is an association at UNSW for students who are interested in Japanese language and culture. Interviews and participants observations were conducted in the NSA.

A case study shows that an OBI zone can facilitate a person to participate in a CoP and an NCoP. The OBI zone made the CoP open to everyone and provided potential members with opportunities to see the inside of the CoP. After that, the CoP became an OBI zone for him and supported him to engage with the NCoP.

Keywords

Community of Practice (CoP), language learning, Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), Networked CoP (NCoP), Overlapping Broad Interface zone (OBI zone), Peripheries

* This paper was presented to the 18th Biennial Conference of the Japanese Studies Association of Australia at the Australian National University from 8th to 11th July 2013 and has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

1. Introduction

Language learners spend most of their time outside of the classroom. As Nunan (1991), Ellis (1994) and others have argued, it is important for learners to use their target language in their daily life in order to improve their proficiency. For example, at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the introductory Japanese course offers a 2-hour lecture, a 1-hour tutorial, and a 2-hour seminar per week during a semester, so that a learner spends 5 hours in a classroom while they are outside of the classroom for 163 hours per week. Additionally, learners can explore more authentic resources outside the class, such as watching Japanese dramas, listening to J-pop, and talking with Japanese friends. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how language learners use and learn Japanese language not only in their Japanese classroom but also in their daily life.

One way for language learners to learn their target language effectively is to place themselves into a Communities of Practice (CoP). A CoP is “a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p. 4). CoPs can provide opportunities to use and learn Japanese outside of the classroom. In this paper, I would like to introduce the concept of Overlapping Broad Interface zone (OBI zone) and discuss how it can help a language learners’ learning process.

2. What is a CoP?

A CoP has common goals among members, and they cooperate with each other in order to achieve these goals (Lave and Wenger, 1991). According to Wenger *et al.* (2002), a CoP consists of three fundamental elements: domain; community; and practice, which are inter-dependent (Figure 1). As Wenger *et al.* (2002) explain:

A *domain* of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a *community* of people who care about this domain; and the shared *practice* that they are developing to be effective in their domain (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p.27, italics in original).

The first element, domain, is defined as specific topics shared by members of a CoP. The domain can “create common ground and a sense of common identity” among members (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p.27). In other words, the domain provides a shared point of view on mutual topics. It consists of key issues or problems that members commonly experience and are interested in. The domain of a CoP can range from very mundane know-how to highly specialized professional expertise. The domain is not a fixed set of problems, but evolves along with the CoP. The most successful CoPs thrive where the goals and needs of an organisation intersect with the passions and desires of participations (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). The second element, community, consists of “people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment” (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p.34). In order to build a CoP, members must interact regularly on important issues for their domain. Over time, they can build a sense of common history and identity. The third element is practice, which refers to the specific knowledge that a CoP develops, and maintains. Practice involves “a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain and a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance and accountability” (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p.38). Practice is shared with members in the CoP. An effective practice evolves with the CoP (Wenger *et al.*, 2002).

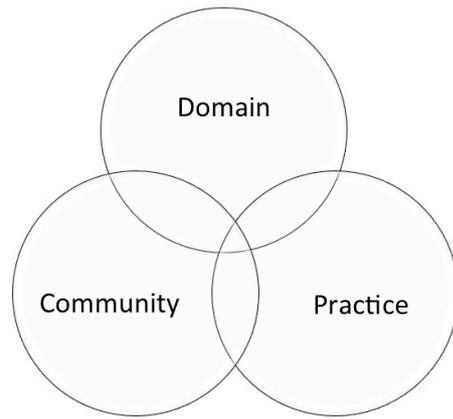


Figure 1. Elements of CoP

3. Network of UNSW Japanese communities

At the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Japanese studies program hosts various communities and creates connections not only among these communities but also between them and existing communities, such as Japanese speakers communities and the Nippon Students Association (NSA) (Figure 2).

It is possible to apply the concept of CoP to the network of UNSW Japanese communities, although the network includes many small communities. First, the communities share a large topic; the Japanese language and culture. Each small community has specific issue or topic; for example introductory Japanese course community has their own aims and objectives. As a network, each specific topic can support or relate with each other. Probably Japanese teachers at UNSW want their students to improve their Japanese, and support their students to achieve the aim and objectives. Regarding the second element, community, people in the network can see others in their community regularly in the class or events, even though it is difficult to communicate with all people in the network. In order to develop their skills or knowledge in their domain, they can also help each other beyond the communities, such as the teachers and students. In terms of practice, not only in the communities but also beyond the communities, people can engage in their activities and improve their knowledge or skills in their own process to achieve their aim and objectives. Therefore, in this paper, the network of UNSW Japanese communities will be regarded as a Networked CoP (NCoP).

This paper will focus on the NSA, which is a student community on campus. The NSA aims to unite UNSW students with a common interest in Japanese language and culture. The NSA has approximately 600 members, but 30-40 members of them are regular members. The NSA offers events at least once every week during a semester. These events include: barbecues; movie screenings; bowling; Karaoke; a yukata¹ day; and dinners. The NSA places particular importance on their Japanese language conversation workshop. In conversation workshops, advanced students teach Japanese to beginner students. Sometimes they invite Japanese native speakers to conversation workshops. As shown in the figure, it is connected to the other communities on and off campus in a variety of ways. For example, it is connected to the Japanese courses through members who enrolled Japanese courses or have studied Japanese language at UNSW. Some Japanese-speaking members are also involved in the Japanese courses as volunteer supporters. As supporters, they often communicate with Japanese teachers. Some NSA members also have a Japanese background and are close to UNSW Japanese speaking community.

The NSA can also be regarded as a CoP. It fits the description of CoP as a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p. 4). The NSA has the three components. Regarding domain, the NSA members share a specific topic, which is Japanese language and culture. Regarding the component of community, the NSA members interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. Regarding Practice, it is possible to say that the NSA has some practices. The conversation workshops, for example, can contribute specific knowledge that a CoP develops, shares and maintains.

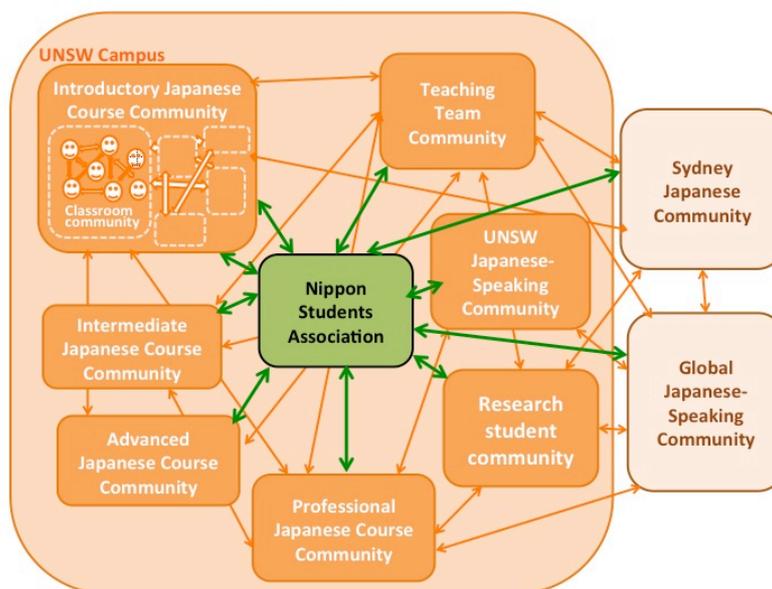


Figure 2. Network of UNSW Japanese communities (Modified Thomson and Mori, in press)

¹ A yukata is a casual summer Kimono.

4. How do people learn in a CoP?

Lave and Wenger considered learning process as participation process in a CoP, based on their concept of situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). Lave and Wenger's core idea of "situated" can be divided into two major parts. First, this theory views learning as an aspect of any activity people are involved in. While people are engaged in an activity, they are learning at the same time. For example, when a non-native Japanese speaker watches a Japanese drama for entertainment, they are also learning something from the drama. They might realise that Japanese people change their speaking style depending on whom they are talking with, or might pick up some new Japanese words or expressions. Second, Lave and Wenger (1991) also emphasise that learning involves the whole person. They focus on how a person changes comprehensively, by looking at changes in the person him/herself, as well as at changes in the behaviour of the person during activities, rather than simply looking at what factual knowledge or skills are gained. One Japanese language learner, for example, became able to speak Japanese much better at the end of semester. Situated learning will consider not only development of his speaking skills during the semester but also changes of himself. This might be because he has studied with his classmates and developed their friendships, so that he started to feel comfortable to speak Japanese in the class.

Based on situated learning, Lave and Wenger proposed the concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), which is defined as the process through which a newcomer becomes a full member in a CoP. In LPP, learning process implies how a person participates in a CoP. At the beginning, newcomers can only participate in unimportant tasks in a CoP. At this stage, people around them and they themselves think they are newcomers who have neither skill nor knowledge. As time advances, they play more important roles. Old-timers will teach or guide them time by time so that they can gain appropriate skills and knowledge in the process. They might be in a position to teach something to newcomers, not only in the position to be taught by their seniors. Their self-identities will change while people increasingly identify them differently. Then they become full members of the CoP.

5. Overlapping Broad Interface zone (OBI zone)

Based on LPP, supporting to involve learners in a CoP and an NCoP is a way to encourage them to learn their target languages. Overlapping Broad Interface zone (OBI zone) can help them to engage with a CoP and an NCoP. The OBI zone defined as an area that overlaps the inside and outside of a CoP, where insiders and outsiders can interact with each other (Shimasaki, 2012). As figure 3 shows, this edge is not just a line, but a wide band, which is alluded to a Kimono belt. In Japanese, the belt is called *obi* (Figure 4).

According to Shimasaki (2012), the OBI zone can offer benefits not only to non-members of a CoP but also to a CoP itself. Here, the benefits

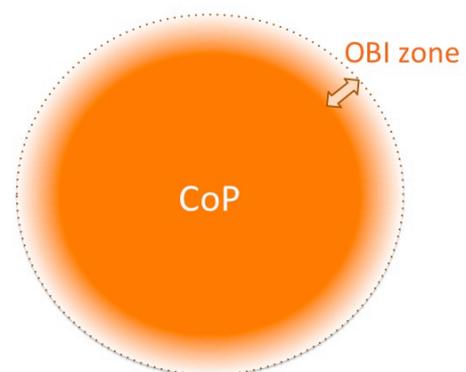


Figure 3. OBI zone

will be explained with examples of the NSA from my data (Shimasaki, 2012). For non-members, there are three benefits from the OBI zone. First, anyone can join, and it is not necessary to have any shared purpose. The OBI zone enables non-members to join activities without any roles or obligations. For example, the NSA is very open to everyone. Even if the events are called conversation workshops, participants are not forced to study. They do not need to be students. They can just observe or meet friends, whatever serves their unique purpose. One of the participants joined conversation workshops in order to make friends. Actually he is Korean but he graduated from a university in Japan. He came to Sydney to study law about four month ago. He did not have many friends here. His Japanese proficiency was much higher than any one else in the conversation workshops, including advance students who lead the workshop there. His purpose was not to improve his Japanese but to make friends who share his interests related to Japan. Even if he had a slightly different purpose, he was able to join the NSA because of the OBI zone. Second the OBI zone enables non-members to see the details of a CoP such as, what kind of people are there, what they do in CoP's activities, and experience how they participate in the activities. For example, one day two female students, both first year students at UNSW, joined a conversation workshop held by the NSA. They were not sure what the conversation workshops are about and asked if they were able to meet some other first year students in the NSA. They stayed for the conversation workshop and started to participated more regularly. Third, the OBI zone facilitates the participation of potential members by enabling non-members to connect with members. During the interviews of Shimasaki (2012), some of the participants mentioned that they felt it was very important to develop friendships and connect with other members in order to be part of the NSA.

A CoP also benefits from the OBI zone; the OBI zone enables existing members to recruit. During the interview of Shimasaki (2012), the president of the NSA explained that he tried to talk with all participants in activities and make connections with other members in order to involve them in the NSA. Additionally the OBI zone protects the CoP from people who might harm to the CoP. One of the committee members explained that sometimes there are people who misunderstand the NSA as a dating club, which can be very uncomfortable for other members. As soon as a committee member notices such behavior, they take appropriate steps to deal with the situation.

The OBI zone is a similar concept to peripheries, which Wenger (1998) proposed. Peripheries are one type of practice-based connections that beyond boundary encounters (Wenger, 1998). Due to the peripheries, CoPs can connect with the rest of the world. The peripheries can offer experiences to people who are not on a trajectory to become full members—including observations and non-formal participation. That participation style is legitimate access to a practice without subjecting them to the demands of full membership. What the outsiders and the newcomers have done in the peripheries and the OBI zone will be part of their trajectory to

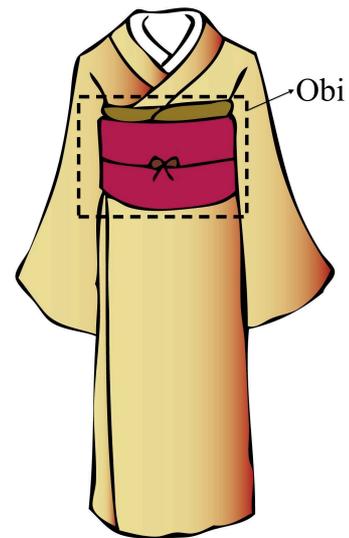


Figure 4. Japanese Kimono belt (Obi)

become full members. No matter how narrow, the peripheries and the OBI zone are different from boundaries, which, according to Wenger (1998), refer to lines of distinction between inside and outside, membership and non-membership, inclusion and exclusion. In other words, the peripheries are a region that is neither fully inside nor fully outside, and surrounds the practice with degree of permeability (Wenger, 1998).

There are three common benefits for newcomers and outsiders in the peripheries and the OBI zone. First, both of them are ways to connect between the inside and the outside of a CoP. In the peripheries or the OBI zone, old-timers and newcomers, insiders and outsiders can interact with each other. Second, the peripheries and the OBI zone enable the newcomers and the outsiders not only to observe activities in the CoP but also to join the activities. They can see who is there, what they do in CoP's activities, and how they participate in the activities. Third, the peripheries and the OBI zone enable potential members to prepare to be members. They can start to make connections with existing members and other potential members and to build their own history in a CoP.

Unlike the peripheries, however, the OBI zone can provide the CoPs themselves with benefits, not only individuals such as newcomers and outsiders. According to Wenger *et al.* (2002), individual learning process and CoP development influence on each other, in particular the later stage of CoP development. In order for people to learn their target languages, it is essential for a CoP to be healthy and active. A CoP is not an object, which exists in and of itself and can be separated from the process giving rise to it (Wenger, 1998). Rather, it is organic. The OBI zone plays an important role in bringing fresh vitality into the CoP. In the OBI zone, members and non-members can communicate with each other. A CoP can receive an influx of new ideas, approaches, and relationships. The OBI zone is more open to everyone and, in the OBI zone, it is not necessary for the outsiders and the newcomers to have shared purpose. They can join any activities without any roles or obligation. Because of this openness, CoPs can have opportunities to invite more people and include other people's opinions. Additionally, the OBI zone enabled a CoP to protect itself. Insiders can know what kind of people are potential members. If they find someone who can harm their CoP, they will deal with the situation.

Thus, the OBI zone supports not only individual newcomers but also the development of CoPs themselves. This paper will use the concept of OBI zone to analyse how a person participates in a CoP as well as an NCoP.

6. Data Collection

This paper is based on data I have collected for her PhD thesis. This research was carried out in the NSA at UNSW during semester 2 2012 and semester 1 2013.

In my data collection, four methods were used: participant observations; voice recordings; video recordings; and semi-structured interviews. I participated and observed most of the NSA events and meetings, and took notes throughout. Particularly in the conversation workshops, I carried out voice recordings and video recordings as well. I conducted semi-structured interviews for a maximum four times during the data collection: at the beginning and end of semester 2 2012 and at the beginning and end of semester 1 2013. I had interviews with ten NSA members in total, including newcomers, regular members, committee members, and previous/current presidents.

This paper will focus on one of the participants, George and discuss how he has been involved in the NSA and a network of UNSW Japanese communities through the OBI zone.

7. Case Study: George

7.1 George's story

George is currently a fourth-year student majoring in finance. He has excellent academic records in his courses. He decided not to enrol any Japanese courses at UNSW in order to keep his Weighted Average Mark (WAM) high. This is because language courses in general give students a lots of small assignments during a semester, and the students need to spend more hours to study the language than other subjects. Although he does not have any future plans to work in Japan yet, he wants to work at an international company and improve his Japanese to the point so that he would be send abroad by the company temporarily.

George likes the Japanese language and culture. When he was a teenager, he was interested in Japanese pop culture, such as anime and music. He also likes how the Japanese language sounds. Although he has never studied Japanese at school or an educational institution, he has learned by himself on the Internet. His Japanese proficiency is at a beginner level so that he seldom uses Japanese in the NSA. Sometimes, he says some greetings or set phases in Japanese, such as “Wakatta (I understand.)”, “Daijoubu (No worries.)” and “Arigatou (Thank you.)”.

George joined the NSA when he was a first-year student. At that time, he wanted to involve himself in extra curricula activities because he believed social activities help his career. He was planning to join some clubs and thinking to join the committee of them. The NSA was one of them. He found the NSA during the Orientation week. One of the committee members gave him a flyer. George participated in the first NSA event, which was the game night. He had lots of fun there and made friends. Then he decided to become a member of the NSA. In a short while, the president asked him to be a general committee member and George accepted the offer. He had been in that position for roughly two years. George has developed friendships with other committee members. Some of them have studied Japanese at UNSW for a few years and can speak Japanese fluently. He went to Karaoke parties and dinners with them and attended their birthday parties. For him, the NSA is like a family and he felt the people in the NSA are friendlier than other clubs he joined.

As a committee member, George contributes enormously to the NSA. During the committee meeting, George always took part in discussion actively and made helpful comments and advice. Every time the NSA has a manpower shortage, he was willing to help them to prepare for the events. However, he himself neither often participated in the NSA events nor talked to NSA members besides the committee members; for example, when the NSA held a movie screening event, other committee members were busy. Then George brought a DVD and showed it to participants, but he neither watched the movie nor talked much with the participants. Instead, he was working on his assignment in the theater during the movie.

At the beginning of semester 1 2013, the NSA carried out an Annual General Meeting to elect the new president and committee members. George was strongly nominated by other committee members because through his jobs as a committee member, they fully recognised that George is responsible and credible. He could not accept the nomination from other committee members straight away. Although his purposes to join the NSA were to obtain social experiences

to write down on his resume and to have fun with his friends, his first priority in his life was his study. For him, it is considerably important to keep his WAM high. He was afraid that being the president must be a heavy time consuming.

Ultimately, George decided to be the president at the end. He explained the reason in his interview as below.

Ummm because I guess it's for the club. I thought it would be better someone who is willing to do so rather than someone force to do so to take over the job. (Underlined by the author)

Since George became the president, George became more actively participated in the events, and engaged with the NSA not only for himself but also the NSA. George participated in every single NSA event and he tried to talk to all participants in every event. To give an example, on the Yukata day, he not only set up a booth but also wore a Yukata and took photos with other NSA members, instead of doing his assignment there. He also contacted Japanese teachers and visited Japanese lectures to promote our events. As a result, George was able to know more people and understand them better.

One of them is his girlfriend, Jenny. She was a new NSA committee member. They were developing their relationship through the NSA activities and committee meetings and then became a couple one month after George became the president. Jenny's Japanese proficiency level is advance and she also actively engaged with UNSW Japanese communities, unlike George. She has enrolled Japanese courses from introductory to advance for three years. She is a well-known student among Japanese teachers. She also has many friends who studied together in the Japanese courses and who have a Japanese background. Additionally, Jenny was a Jr. teacher, who goes to an introductory or intermediate course and helps students as a senior, such as reading a model dialog and answering questions from the students. Through her, he was able to know inside of the network of UNSW Japanese communities whereas he was known as Jenny's boyfriend.

In semester 2 2013, George changed his mind to enrol the introductory Japanese course at university. Actually George's grades dropped at the end of semester 1 2013 because he could not have as much time to study as before. However, he did not quit as the president and continued to put himself in charge.

In the introductory Japanese course, George actively involved himself. Sometimes he promoted the NSA in the Japanese course. Thus, he became known not only as Jenny's boyfriend but also as himself among the teachers and others in the network.

George's story illustrates how George participated in the NSA and the network of UNSW Japanese communities. When he just joined the NSA, he was thinking only his grades, career and fun. Through the NSA activities, he has increasingly involved himself not only in the NSA but also in the network of UNSW Japanese communities.

7.2 Analysis of the story

George's story can be divided into four stages (Figure 5). At the first stage, George is in the OBI zone of the NSA, but outside of the network of UNSW Japanese communities. Then, he is inside of the NSA but still outside of the network at the stage 2. After that, he also entered in the OBI

zone of the network. Finally, he is inside of both the NSA and the network. This section will describe how the OBI zones can help George's participation in the NSA and the network.

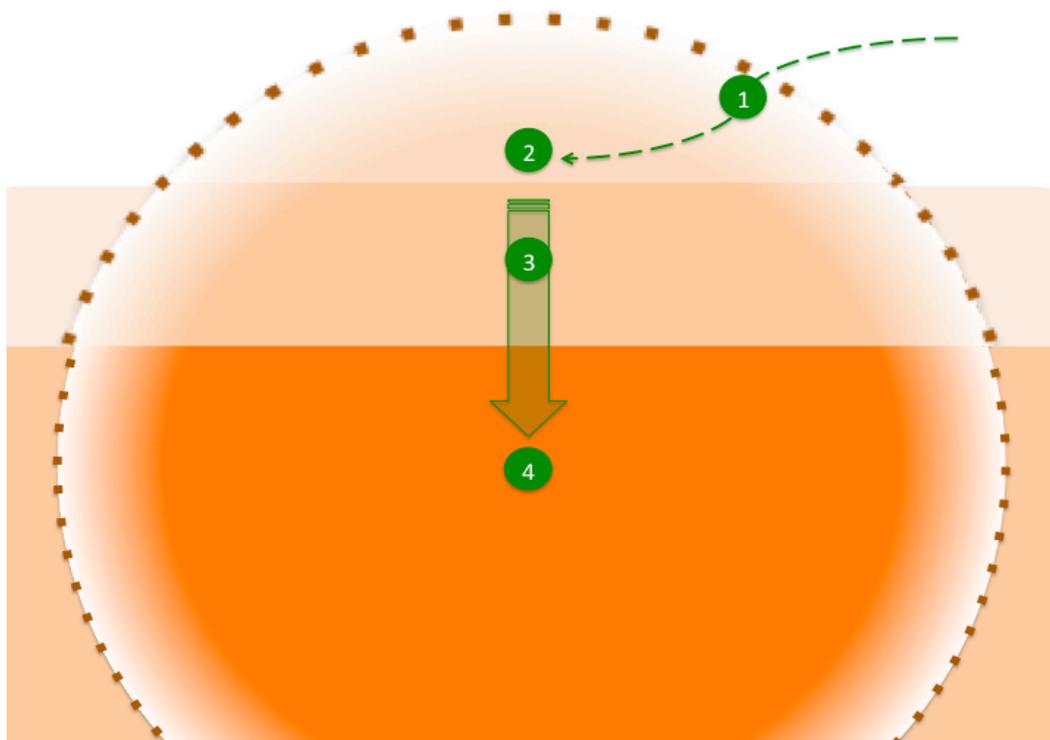


Figure 5. George's trajectory

At the first stage, George was in the OBI zone of the NSA. The OBI zone helped him to be involved in the NSA. Wideness of the NSA's domain and community is an OBI zone for newcomers. The NSA's domain is an area related to Japanese language and culture, which is the same as the network of UNSW Japanese communities, itself. However, the NSA might have a wider domain than any other UNSW Japanese communities. The NSA is for any student who has interests in Japanese language and culture. While in all other communities in the network, students have to be legitimate members in a given community. For instance, in the Japanese courses, students need to be enrolled, and depending on the level, they are required to have certain proficiency in order to enrol. In the research students' community, the students are required to carry out research. In the Japanese speaking community, they need to be able to speak Japanese. Therefore, it is possible to say that the NSA's domain affords more diverse background, the purposes and interests of the members. Because the NSA's domain is wider than the domain of other UNSW Japanese communities, the NSA can provide a gateway for more diverse students to the network of UNSW Japanese communities. The community can include students who cannot enrol in Japanese course because of their program. Due to such a wider domain and community of the NSA, the door was also open for George, although he was a very beginner level of Japanese speaker and did not enrol any Japanese courses at university at that time. Additionally George was not a member of the NSA yet, but he was able to see the inside of the NSA because of the OBI zone. He attended the game night and had lots of fun. Here, he was able to see the details of the NSA, such as what the NSA is organising, who is there and how they participate in the activities. Because of the OBI zone, George was also able to facilitate his

participation in the NSA. For example, He met the NSA members in the event and established connections with them.

When he officially became a member of the NSA, he reached the second stage. Because of the OBI zone, the NSA was able to recruit George, who is a responsible and helpful person, as a committee member. A soon as he joined the NSA officially, the president asked him to be a committee member. Because of the OBI zone, he was able to attend the game night without an official membership. It enabled the existing members to know what kind of person George is in the game night.

After George became the president, he moved to the third stage. The OBI zone enabled him to see the details of the network and to facilitate the participation in the network. On this stage, he tried to involve himself in the NSA as much as he can. As a result, he was able to know the community of the NSA deeply. Through the community, he obtained connections with the network of UNSW Japanese communities through the community of the NSA. His girlfriend, Jenny provided him with the OBI zone. Through her, George was able to know the details of the network of Japanese communities whereas the teachers and others in the network knew him. George also had opportunities to see the inside of the network and to communicate with the Japanese teachers and students when he visited the Japanese lectures. It was also the OBI zone for George.

Finally, George decided to enroll a Japanese course at university. George knows others in the network while they know who he is. It means that he officially became a member of the network of UNSW Japanese communities.

8. Conclusion

This study shows how a person was able to be involved in a CoP and an NCoP through an OBI zone. Because of the OBI zone, a newcomer can start to participate in a CoP. He can see the details of the CoP and experience what the existing members do in the CoP before he becomes an official member. He is also able to start to establish connections with members and potential members. Additionally, the OBI zone works for the CoP itself; it can provide opportunities to recruit new key members. As participation process has developed, the CoP as an OBI zone facilitates his participation into an NCoP. The CoP as the OBI zone offers connections to the NCoP. It enables him to know the inside of the NCoP and start to prepare for being a member of the NCoP. Thus, the OBI zone can support newcomer's participation process over the two levels; a CoP and an NCoP.

This study, however, has focused only on the NSA. Other CoPs might provide more functions as an OBI zone in the network of UNSW Japanese communities. Additionally, it is necessary to see other participation process in other CoPs and networks from the viewpoint of OBI zone.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge invaluable the contributions of Prof. Chihiro Thomson and other postgraduate study group members, who have led to a significant improvement in this study. I greatly appreciate their feedback and comments. However, I am solely responsible for all errors

and misinterpretations. Additionally, I gratefully acknowledge the scholarship received towards my PhD from Shoyu-kurabu, Japan. Last but not the least, I would like to give special thanks to Vincent Uecker.

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About the Author

Kaori Shimasaki is a PhD candidate at the University of New South Wales. Her PhD research focuses on processes of language learning in a CoP and development of the CoP, based on situated learning. She is also interested in learner autonomy, identities and learning environment design.