What are Communities of Practice?

Key theorist, Etienne Wenger, defines Communities of Practice as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 1998).

It is a process of social learning that occurs when members collaborate, share ideas and strategies, determine solutions and build innovation. They are known by many names such as learning networks, tech clubs, reading circles, teaching teams, interdisciplinary research collaborations and other hubs where knowledge and practice is continually developed and shared.

Wenger (1998) identified three critical elements of Communities of Practice:

- Domain or mutual engagement, where an identity is defined and shared by a community based on the common goals or interests of its members. Members are more likely to be motivated by their passion for the domain and are committed to regularly interact and contribute.
- Community or joint enterprise, where people care about the domain and actively participate in activities, discussions, helping each other and share information. Relationships are built that enable mutual learning and members are mindful of their standing within the community.
- Practice or shared repertoire, where resources, experiences, stories and tools are shared. Ways of addressing problems are continually developed, often resulting in new knowledge and innovation. Members are practitioners, regularly applying the domain's knowledge and skills.

Communities of Practice require a combination of these three elements. Communities are cultivated by constantly developing these elements simultaneously.

What do they look like?

Communities of practice are everywhere:

- Some are small, others large with a core group and many peripheral members.
- Some meet face-to-face, others virtually and some use a mix of modalities. Some meet on a regular basis, others infrequently.
- Some are formally organised with charters, codes of conduct, structured roles and responsibilities, strategic plans and budgets. Others are completely informal, organic and self-organised. They may be invisible but they are not isolated or independent from other practices.

Communities of Practice are noted for their *function* (the open sharing of information, knowledge and skills) and *motivation* (voluntary participation by members who are committed and passionate).

Membership of a community of practice always involves learning. Learning could be the reason the community comes together, or it may be an unintentional outcome from when members interact.

As professionals, we travel through numerous communities over the course of our careers which help create relationships and networks across disciplines, organisations and geographic boundaries.

What do communities do?

The literature is rich with examples of what Communities of Practice do and their benefits, such as:

- Connecting people with common interests results in stronger relationships and networks across functional, disciplinary, organisational and geographic boundaries.
- Facilitating knowledge exchange that leads to greater access to ideas and awareness of new developments that combine and inform action.

- Mapping knowledge and practices relating to the domain, identifying gaps and seeking out new information.
- Reinvigorating and innovating practice, as members solve problems, build arguments and improve how people think collectively about the domain.
- Continually growing capability and community confidence as members work together to train and develop each other and help create new experiences.
- Attracting and retaining talent, attention and growing support.

Where did the concept come from?

The concept is an age-old phenomenon. However, Community of Practice theory was created in 1991 by anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. They positioned Community of Practice as a learning theory, where learning and identity is situated and constantly negotiated by participating in the practices of the community. The community acts as living curriculum for all involved.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) research suggests that learning is a special type of social practice associated with the relationship between newcomers and existing members (or, 'old timers'). All members have similar or complementary interests and responsibilities but different levels of personal competencies and experiences. N*ewcomers join communities through a process of 'legitimate peripheral participation'. This is a process of immersion in the new community and absorbing its activities and meanings as a part of becoming a community member.*

Being a member of a community is more than 'receiving' a body of knowledge. Active membership provides a comprehensive understanding of the whole person as practitioner. Communities have the potential to change how people think, speak, behave and relate to others, ideas and different contexts. As members become more expert in the practice, they draw on and even enhance the repertoire, tools and resources of the community in a more fluent and confident manner. Their participation becomes richer and more fulfilling.

Challenges and debates

Some of the key challenges and debates include the following:

- Conceptual confusion: Can groups of shared interest such as taskforces, workgroups, committees, boards and others be identified as Communities of Practice? Aren't all groups in some way Communities of Practice?
- Structure and leadership: To what extent can Communities of Practice be led, managed or controlled and what are the consequences of such actions? How could member disengagement, poor participation and conflict be addressed?
- Impact: How can the outcomes and outputs of a community be measured?
- Time and effort: Does the community have the willingness and ability to continually create genuine opportunities to network and shared tasks? When do communities reach their zenith and expiry date?

Questions

Now that you have read this short overview, return to the module and share with the group key insights and responses to these two questions:

- How do the ideas presented here relate to your own understanding and experiences of Community of Practice?
- What are the similarities and the differences?

References and Further Reading

Hoadley, C. (2012). What is a Community of Practice and how can we support it? In D. H. Jonassen and S.M. Land (Eds.). *Theoretical Foundations of Learning Environments* (2nd Edition, pp. 287-300). Routledge, New York.

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