# Communities of Practice: Doing it Together

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Humans beings learn from a great deal from and with one another. Recognising this, Lave and Wenger (1991)describe a *community of practice* as a community whose members engage in and shape a particular shared practice over time. They regard learning as situated, having a location in space and time as well as a social setting, giving community members the role of engaging in, 'the generative process of producing their own future' (p. 58-9). Noting the relevance of the concept to the world of work and to learning in the workplace, Wenger (1998) developed and extended his earlier work with Jean Lave into a social theory of learning based on *communities of practice*.

## *Community of Practice basics*

Defining knowledge as, 'a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises' (p4), the *communities of practice* framework provides a 'thinking tool' with which to better understand and interpret our world, and in particular, the means by which knowledge is developed and shared.

The *practice* shared by a *community of practice* is built on the knowledge that a community needs to underpin its current and future exploration in its particular field of knowledge and skill. A practice is:

> *a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance, and accountability … It also embodies a certain way of behaving, a perspective on problems and ideas, a thinking style, and even in many cases an ethical stance. In this sense, a practice is a sort of mini-culture that binds the community together* (Wenger et al. 2002*p. )*.

The knowledge resources of a *community of practice* range from the explicit and the tacit, from physical artefacts such as specialist tools and accumulated recorded knowledge such as that in standards, manuals or conference proceedings through to the ability to assign meaning to small changes that might not be noticed by others unfamiliar with the practice. The collective resources of a community also include the less formal narrative discourses related to the experiences of successes, best practices and lessons learned, as well as heuristics, frameworks, principles, and models. A successful *community of practice* balances, 'joint activities, in which members explore ideas together, and the production of "things" like documents or tools … the twin goals of interacting with peers and creating knowledge products complement each other' (Wenger et al. 2002, pp. 3940).Participation in a community of practice can be described as core, active, peripheral or outsider (see Figure 1). Core members make up about 10 to 15% of the community and share the internal leadership of a community of practice, though one may act as a coordinator. The legitimacy of members to be part of the core group is based on their recognition as, 'organizers, experts and "thought leaders" , pioneers, administrators, and boundary spanners' (Wenger et al. 2002).. Key community tasks are carried out by members of both the core group and a second group of another 15% to 20% of members who are active within the community, though the regularity and intensity of their participation is not to the level of the core group. The largest membership portion of a community of practice is peripheral. These members rarely participate, keeping 'to the sidelines, watching the interaction of the core and active members … [gaining] their own insights from the discussions and [putting] them to good use, … learning a lot' (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002).. Included in this group are newcomers to the practice who further their learning about the practice through their legitimate peripheral participation in the community of practice; those confining or reducing their relationship with the community as they near retirement or change direction, and those who take

a pivotal role between two communities of practice in which they are involved (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Communities of practice work\best when members of each of these groups '[feel] like full members' (p56). Beyond these three main levels, are *outsiders* –people Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) describe as having, 'an interest in the community, including customers, suppliers and "intellectual neighbours"' (p39). The permeability of the boundaries between the levels of a community and between the community and its environment allow involvement to vary according the current focus of the individual and/or community and its need for particular expertise and interest.

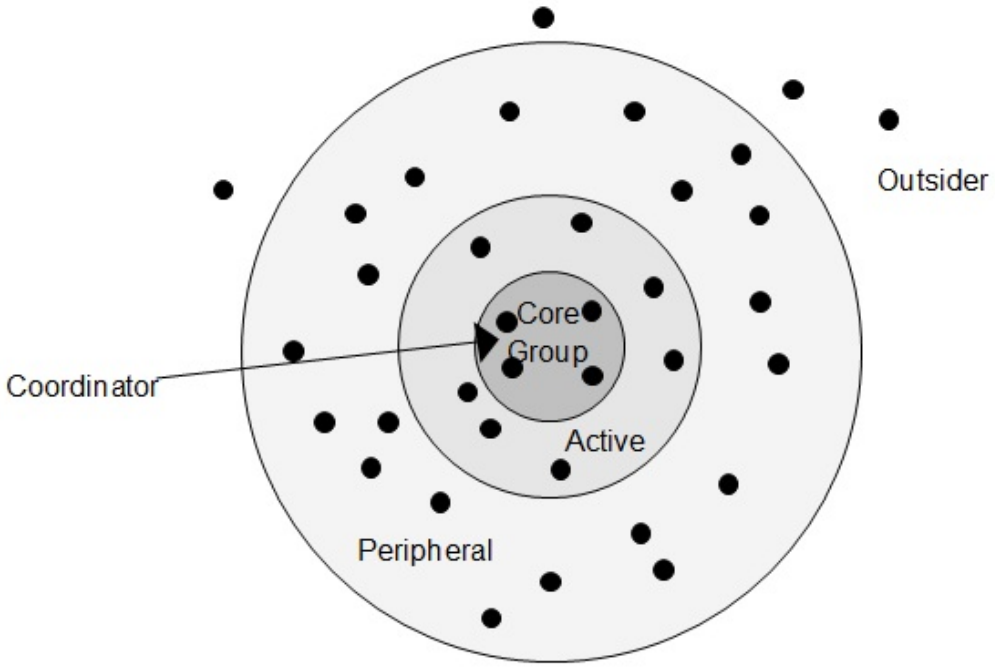


**Figure 1**. Degrees of participation in a community of practice (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 80)

*Communities of practice* can be geographically co-located or dispersed or even virtual. Individuals can and do belong to more than one community of practice and participate in each community at various levels. Communities of practice also interact with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.

### *The Community of Practice life cycle*

C*ommunities of practice* do not just happen. To be successful, *communities of practice* address many challenges as they evolve. Wenger et al. (2002) describe the evolutionary stages through which communities of practice pass, as:

- ***Identification*** of community potential by defining the community's scope to engage prospective members and to meet organisational needs; identification of people who already network on the topic and persuading them to broaden their network, and identification of common knowledge needs.
- ***Coalescence*** into a community through the establishment of value of sharing domain relevant knowledge, the development of interpersonal relationships and sufficient trust to address 'sticky' problems, the development of a deep insight into individual practice and

thinking styles of group's members, development of a collective understanding of the community's practice, the initiation of events and spaces where community can share, and the identification of the nature of and means by which specific knowledge should be shared.

- ***Maturation*** of the community through the definition of community's role within the wider community and its relationship with other domains; the management of the membership of the community so that it remains engaged and focused on core issues; the identification of gaps in the community's existing knowledge and the nature of its 'cutting edge' , and the development of a need to organise its core knowledge and to take stewardship of that knowledge seriously.
- ***Stewardship*** of the community's knowledge through the maintenance of the domain's relevance; the establishment of a voice in the organisation or broader community serviced by the community; the management of the membership of the community so that it remains actively engaged, including new members and new leadership, and finally, concentration upon cutting edge issues.
- ***Dissolution*** or ***transformation*** into new communities as a result of the resolution of challenges that gave rise to the community, evolution of a new domain, the loss of members through lack of relevance or commitment to other communities, the routinisation of the practice, or, its evolution to something different.

Wenger et al.'s (2002) graphical representation (p. 69) of these stages is presented in Figure 2. In the figure, the jagged line represents the level of energy and visibility that the community typically generates over time.

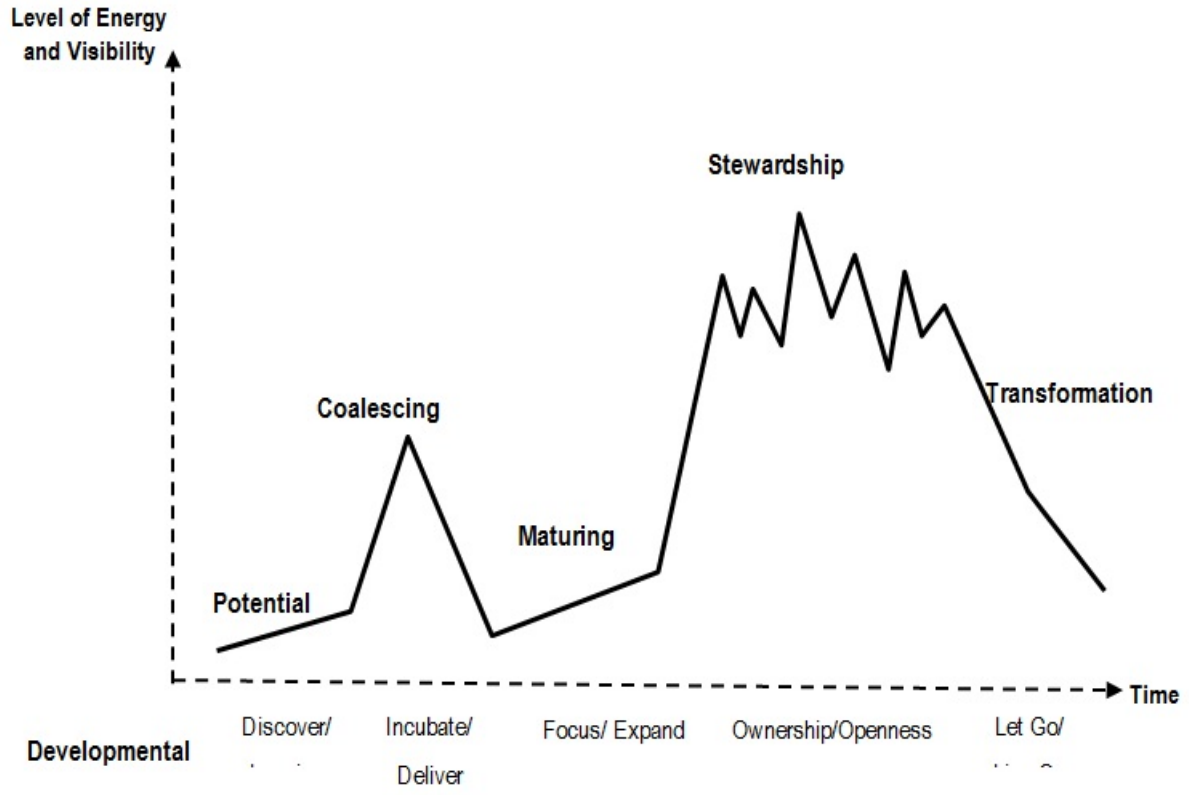


**Figure 2**. Stages of development of a community of practice

### *Communities of Practice in research*

The communities of practice framework are accessible in that it resonates with the everyday experiences of both practitioners and researchers.

The framework offers both the language and insights to provide a rich description of human practice and the social interactions surrounding practice, thus supporting analysis and deeper understanding of the, 'patterned conduct and social processes of society, and … the bases in values and attitudes on which individual and collective participation is social life rests' (Vidich & Lyman, 1994, p. 23).

With an ethnographic approach, research using the *communities of practice* framework will:

- Focus on a small number of phenomena if not just one phenomenon;
- Explore the nature of that social phenomenon rather that to test a hypothesis about it;
- Work primarily with data that has not been coded at the point of data collection, as in, for example, a survey;
- Analyse and explicitly interpret the meanings and functions of human actions using the language and insights provided by the framework of communities of practice rather than using statistical methods to quantify and analyse numerical data (Atkinson & Hammersley 1994).

In reality, many of the notions associated with *communities of practice* are not new to us. We recognise their resonance with the craft guilds of times gone by, with apprenticeship systems and with organised hobby groups. Hodkinson points to *communities of practice* as the particular locus of learning at work, noting Lave and Wenger's claim (in Hodkinson, 2004 p13) that 'in order to learn … a person [had] to belong to something'.

What is new is the way in which the *communities of practice* framework provide the language and insights that contribute to the ways in which we can think and talk about:

- ***Meaning*** – Our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful;
- ***Practice*** – The shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action;
- ***Community*** – The social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence;
- ***Identity*** – How learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities.

The *communities of practice* framework has broad implications for understanding and supporting learning and for comprehending and supporting the development and stewardship of knowledge pertinent to a shared practice:

- For ***individuals***, it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities.
- For ***communities***, it means that learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuring new generations of members.
- For ***organisations***, it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organisation knows what it knows and thus becomes and stays effective and valuable as an organisation.

Information and communications technologies have and will continue to impact on human society. With globalisation comes the global workplace where the members of work teams are

situated around the globe and who rely on information and communications technologies to support their interactions. It is not surprising then that more recently attention has been given to virtual communities of practice whose members are co-located in time, but not space.

An example of the use of the Communities of Practice framework can be seen in Section 3.

### *References and links*

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