**Introduction to Communities of Practice**

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Introduction

Communities of practice (CoP) can be very beneficial to a variety of fields of practice, sectors, and organizations. Through communities of practice, members can learn and share knowledge to gain a better understanding of a range of topics and issues.  To be able to establish a community of practice, the elements required of a CoP must be understood. The elements are: collaboration opportunities, support, strong relationships, and commitment. Another element needed for a community of practice includes a wide range of colleagues, such as educators, students, supervisors, etc. (Lee et al., 2009, p. 41).  Through these elements, members can experience the many benefits associated with a community of practice (Seibert, 2015, p. 71). These benefits include: improved communication, balance between individual and group learning, and sharing of knowledge. However, with these benefits there may be challenges that can arise and need to be addressed (Cox, 2005, p. 6). Challenges that may arise are: Unsustainable relationships, competitive and time pressurized environments, and individualized work. This paper is an introductory exploration into conversations of

communities of practice through the questions: What is a community of practice? How can members be supported? How have understandings of communities of practice evolved over time? And, what are the potential benefits and challenges of communities of practice?

## What is a Community of Practice?

Communities of practice have been gaining popularity among many fields and professions since the '90s. The concept of a Community of Practice stems from a theory of social learning, and was first introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Li et al., 2009, p. 1). Through a theory of social learning, individuals learn from each other through observation, modeling, and collaboration (Li et al., 2009, p. 3). Lave and Wenger initially defined a CoP as, "People from the same discipline improving their skills by working alongside experts and being involved in increasingly complicated tasks" (Li et al., 2009, p .4). They proposed that by working alongside experts, individuals with varying skills and experiences can learn from each other. Later on, Wenger redefines the term community of practice to reflect further knowledge he has acquired about the concept (Li et al., 2009, p. 6).  Wenger shifts the idea of a CoP from "individuals' learning and identity development" (p. 6). Through this shift, the focus of a CoP is on the gained knowledge of the members, not just the individual. Additionally, the definition of a CoP changes to "groups of people who share concerns, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in their area by interacting on an ongoing basis" ( Li et al., 2009, p. 6).

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger first introduced the concept of communities of practice in 1991 with their book Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. In this book, Lave and Wenger explain that interactions with older, more experienced employees is the process by which newcomers gain knowledge and create their own professional identity within the larger community. In 1998, Wenger updated the concept of CoP in his book, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity. In this work, Wenger introduced the three domains of a CoP: Mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.  Li et al. (2009) define mutual engagement as the "interaction between individuals that leads to the creation of shared meaning on issues or a problem" (p. 5). Joint enterprise is identified as "the process in which people are engaged and working together towards a common goal" (Li et al., 2009, p. 5). Li et al. define shared repertoire as "common resources and jargon that members use to negotiate meaning and facilitate learning within the group" (p. 5).

Following this publication, in 2002, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder published a book called Cultivating Communities of Practice. Through this publication, the three domains introduced in the previous literature by Wenger were changed to the domain, the community, and the practice.  According to Li et al. (2009), the concept of domain "creates the common ground and outlines the boundaries that enable members to decide what is worth sharing and how to present the ideas" (p. 6). Next, community "creates the social structure that facilitates learning through interactions and relationships with others" (Li et al., 2009, p. 6). Lastly, Li et al. (2009) identify practice as being "a set of shared repertoires of resources that include documents, ideas, experiences, information, and ways of addressing recurring problems" (p. 6). In addition

to the change of domain names, Wenger also introduces the concept of leaders and facilitators. According to Li et al. (2009) "the leader/champion is someone who is well respected within an organization, and often holds a leadership position" (p. 6). The leader is not a member in a position of power, but a member who is able to bring the group together and facilitate collaboration. As time progresses, the concept of a community of practice evolves to reflect changes in practice.

Li et al. (2009) explain that in some cases, individuals refer to the term community of practice as a group of people working in the same practice setting (as cited in Seibert, 2015, p. 70). This differs from Wenger's explanation of communities of practice, which not only refers to those working in the same professional environment, but rather as a group of people who share knowledge, ideas, and experiences to better themselves and their field of practice (p. 72). Seibert (2015) explains that communities of practice promote learning opportunities through collaborative approaches that create opportunities for professional development (p. 70). In essence, it is a form of learning and shared knowledge based on social relationships between those who have been in the field or profession for a long time, and those who have recently started their careers. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), this learning happens through a process called 'legitimate peripheral participation' (as cited in Guldberg & Mackeness, 2009, p. 528). Lave and Wenger (1991) describe legitimate peripheral participation as a model that allows newcomers, such as students or new graduates, to collaborate with members of greater experience (as cited in Berry, 2011, p. 9). This allows participants to learn from each other and contemplate ideas after gaining feedback from others.

Li et al. (2009) explain that in order to fully understand the CoP concept, the meaning of 'community' must first be defined and understood (p. 3). Barret and Chrisentary (2015) describe community as, "[A] group of individuals for whom the domain is relevant; community includes the relationship between members" (p. 26). A relevant domain between individuals can include a common interest, or a shared field of practice that members can build a relationship upon. According to Wenger (1998), one of the main characteristics within a CoP is that members have comparable interests, as this allows individuals who have similar practices to connect together and form a CoP (as cited in Guldberg & Mackness, 2009, p. 529). This space of a common relevant domain forms a community for members to learn and share knowledge between each other, and provides opportunity to better their practice.

In addition to defining the concept of community, we must also understand and define the concept of 'practice'. Barret and Chrisentary (2015) define practice as, "the body of knowledge, methods, stories, and documents that members share and develop together" (p. 26). This definition of practice demonstrates that members gain insight and new perspectives on a shared topic of interest through communication and collaboration. Therefore, in a CoP, it is essential to establish strong relationships around shared bodies of knowledge to take part in and to develop new and innovative ideas.

CoP also allow members within an organization to gain a wider range of access to colleagues (Lee et al., 2015, p. 41). This allows educators to interact with students, students with supervisors, and supervisors with educators. When members have a wider range of access to colleagues with a variety of experiences, they can further develop their ideas. This allows CoP to flourish and benefit all who are involved. As a

result, CoP can be found in governments, organizations, education, associations, social service sectors, and the internet (WengerTrayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 4). Since the concept of a CoP can be applied in numerous settings, it is becoming more widespread.

Over time, the concept of a CoP has evolved to include changes in business practices, professional learning, and collaboration. To reflect this change, Wenger currently defines CoP as "groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). The current definition of a CoP removes the thought of experts. Instead, it identifies that within a community of practice, everyone should be seen as an equal contributor; no one contributor is more qualified than another. It is suggested that when members are viewed as equals, they work more closely together and have more intimate and authentic working relationships to advance the focus of their practice (Li et al., 2009, p. 3). The understanding of what a CoP is has been steadily increasing since its introduction in the 1990's.

How have Communities of Practice Evolved over Time?

Although the true intentions of CoP, such as sharing knowledge to improve practices remain unchanged, the method of practice has transformed to adapt to shifts in organizational practice. Hoadley (2012) explains that the meaning of community of practice has evolved over time from a descriptive to a more prescriptive concept (p. 287). The descriptive concept of a CoP stems from a natural occurrence of information sharing through an informal practice of storytelling between individuals about day to

day occurrences.  The prescriptive concept of a CoP is a means for collaboration to

facilitate change within an organization (Hoadley, 2012, p. 288).  Initially, the

descriptive concept of CoP was adopted through a focus on individual learning for

professional growth. With a growing focus on learning and problem solving to improve

the organizations and communities, a prescriptive practice has taken hold.

Although the concept of CoP started as a learning theory that encouraged social

learning and empowerment of new employees, it has recently developed into more of a

broad management tool (Li et al., 2009, p. 7). If a CoP is viewed as a management tool,

it becomes challenging to apply (p. 7). One of the issues that makes the concept of

communities of practice as a management tool challenging to apply is, "The tension

between satisfying individuals' needs for personal growth versus the organization's

bottom line" (Li et al., 2009, p. 7). Viewing a CoP as a management tool can also limit

the benefits that CoP may offer. Benefits, such as the personal growth that members

may acquire within a CoP would be partial when a CoP is viewed as a management

tool. Therefore, it is important to maintain the focus of a CoP to benefit the individual

learner as well as the organization, group, or field of practice.

Guldberg and Mackness (2009) point out that in the more recent works from

Wenger, focus is placed on the identity of individuals within the CoP (pg. 529). Guldberg

and Mackness (2009) state that Wenger (1998) argues that, "individual's identity is fluid

[,] it is formed and re-formed throughout people's lives" (p. 529). The community

members are working through and altering their identity as they move from the outside

of the group as 'newbies' inwards as they become more experienced (p. 529). As

members gain skills and experience, they begin to pass their new found knowledge to others, completing the cycle of knowledge sharing.

The concept of communities of practice has evolved and continues to evolve to improve current practices and provide increased opportunities for individuals to collaborate across the globe. Guldberg and Mackness (2009) discuss the change in definition of a CoP, as now it is "viewed as a management tool through which geographically dispersed teams and groups can be connected" (p. 529). This new view of CoP has led to the rise of virtual CoP. By embracing the use of technology in a CoP:

> functional working groups can consist of team members located in various cities, states, and countries. Technology bridges geographic distances, and virtual communities of practice (VCoP) enable virtual workgroups to gain knowledge by using the virtual environments to reinforce an organization's collective operational knowledge (Barret & Chrisentary, 2015, p. 25).

These virtual communities of practice offer access to individuals that may be interested in becoming members but are not geographically close. As Wenger et al. (2005) explain, "The web has enabled people to interact in new ways across time and space and form new breeds of distribution yet interactive communities of practice" (as cited in Guldberg & Mackness, 2009, p. 529).

Elements of a Community of Practice

        To create successful communities of practice, there are many factors that need

to be considered. Two main factors are: 1) A clear unified focus that is important and

relevant to the practice of the community, and 2) Defined leadership to help build

commitment, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas (Nemec & LaMaster, 2014, p.

 337). Nemec and LaMaster (2014) explain, "Focus topics need to be important to the

community members and relevant to the work itself (the "practice")" (p. 336). A clear

unified focus is important as it provides a community of practice with direction (p. 336).

Defined leadership is also essential in a community of practice. McDermott (2001)

suggests that this leader should be a well-respected community member, as through

this respect the leader will be able to coordinate the CoP (as cited in Nemec &

LaMaster, 2014, p. 337).  As Lencioni (2002) explains, "The leader's role is central to

facilitating personal relationships among community members [,] [this] build[s]

commitment, [and] promote[s] collaboration…a sign of an effective team" (as cited in

Nemec & LaMaster, 2014, p. 337). Therefore, a clear focus and defined leadership are

essential to ensure the effectiveness and success of a community of practice.

        To create a successful community of practice, members should select

themselves rather than be forced or selected to be a part of the community of practice

(Seibert, 2015, p. 71). If members are required to commit to a CoP, they will not be as

invested in their own contributions and the overall success of the CoP. Seibert (2015)

highlights that community members must be willing to join the community of practice, as

this allows members to be self-motivated and fully contribute to improve the practice (p.

71). Lee et al. (2015) explain that there are extrinsic motivators that can prompt

individuals to be a part of a community of practice (p. 42).  These extrinsic motivators

are individual rewards, including better promotion opportunities, better work

assignments, or better job performance reviews. An extrinsic motivator for individuals to

participate in a community of practice would arise from the value or importance an

organization puts on participating (Lee et al., 2015).  If an organization places a high

value on an individual's involvement in a community of practice, the individual may be

motivated to take part in order to gain better job performance reviews or an increased

chance of a promotion.

     Like communities of practice, Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoP) should also

have strong leaders to help form relationships among members that do not have the

benefits of face-to-face connections. Barret and Chrisentary (2015) state that a "VCoP

requires leaders who have the ability to build trust, motivate, and connect and create

personal bonds with individuals through technology" (p. 25). Building strong

relationships is an essential aspect in communities of practice, especially in VCoP

where members cannot experience face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, Barret and

Chrisentary (2015) elaborate on the importance of transformational leadership which

requires an individual to communicate clearly, be highly motivated and encourage

motivation throughout the group, and encourage team collaboration. This individual

must have strong leadership skills, which will help promote respect and motivation

between all members. Guldberg and Mackness (2009) state, "The shift to increasingly

virtual communities of practice would bring challenges to some of the basic principles of

communities of practice, such as experience of 'togetherness' across time and space."

(p. 529). Therefore, the unique nature of virtual communities requires a leader to ensure that members bond together and are empowered as a team.

Similarly, in virtual communities of practice, necessary elements must be considered to ensure the community can form connections and build relationships. Guldberg and Mackness (2009) explain that emotions run high as groups form and new members navigate the community and form connections, and these emotions can run higher with the use of technology (p. 532). Some members may not be as tech savvy as others, and they might feel frustrated when experiencing technical difficulties. Members of virtual communities of practice need to experience connectivity among the group. According to Guldberg and Mackness (2009), "This notion of connectivity [is] related to the feelings of belonging to a community" (p. 532). Participants in a VCoP are most successful when they have the ability to "cope with the technology, adapt their learning strategies to align with the learning environment, effectively manage emotion and learning tensions, make conceptual and social connections and establish an online identity" (Guldberg & Mackness, 2009, p. 534). Therefore, when participants of CoP or VCoP have the elements needed to foster success, they are able to gain the full experience of communities of practice.

Benefits and Challenges of Communities of Practices

Some benefits of communities of practice include: improved communication, balance between individual and group learning, effective utilization of time, pooling resources, break down of cultural barriers, sharing of knowledge, and creating a sense of ownership (Berry, 2011, p. 8).Through these improvements, a community can foster

increased problem solving and decision making in the workplace (Seibert, 2015, p. 72).

Satisfaction and value can also arise from the collaboration and work that members are

a part of within communities of practice. As members acquire new found knowledge,

they feel satisfied because they feel they have learned something new. Members also

feel valued because they are a part of the decision making process, which can increase

feelings of belonging (Seibert, 2015, p. 72).

Through participating in CoP, members gain both short term and long term

benefits. Members are able to receive support for challenges they bring forward, build

confidence, and gain access to expertise (Region of Waterloo, 2015, para. 6). Long

term benefits that members gain are personal development and professional identity.

Members are also able to network with others in the field (Region of Waterloo, 2015,

para. 6).

Organizations also gain benefits for participating in CoP. Their short term benefits

are that CoP involve problem solving, knowledge sharing, and collaboration across units

(Region of Waterloo, 2015, para. 7). As for the long term benefits, organizations gain

strategic capabilities, retention of talents, and are able to keep up to date on new

activities and news (Region of Waterloo, 2015, para. 7). Organizations involved in CoP

gain value and significance, as these opportunities for collaboration result in new and

improved products or services for the organization (Lee et al., 2015, p. 41).

Similar to CoP, virtual communities of practice have many benefits that may be

experienced by members. Firstly, virtual communities of practice can further enhance

the connections and collaboration among members. According to Hoadley (2012),

technology enables members of communities of practice to be able to represent and

reorganize information in various formats (p. 295). This allows members with different

learning styles to benefit, as they are able to understand information in a way that is

suitable to them. Technology can also be an avenue to connect members of a

community of practice (p. 296). For example, individuals from different countries that

cannot meet in person can create a community of practice online by corresponding

through various social networking databases. This encourages individuals who have

similar practices to connect together and form a virtual community of practice (p. 297).

Cox (2005) suggests that there are many factors that can limit the success of a

CoP (p. 6). The first factor that can limit the success of a CoP is frequent reorganization

(p. 6). This can be a problem because it leads to members of a CoP being unable to

form relationships and sustain them, which in turn leads to a lack of opportunities to

collaborate amongst each other. Another factor is employment of temporary or part time

staff. This is a problem because these individuals are unable to accomplish their tasks

based on their schedules. Individualized work is also identified by Cox (2005) as a

factor that can limit the success of a CoP (p. 6). Individualized work decreases the

chances members have to connect with each other and increase their knowledge.

Competitive and time pressurized environments can also create conflict through

collaboration in a CoP (Cox, 2005, p. 6). This creates a stressful and unwelcoming

environment for all members of the CoP, as they feel pressured because of these

circumstances.

Like CoP, there are also potential challenges that come from virtual communities

of practice. Li et al. (2009) refers to "issues regarding privacy, user-friendliness of online

technologies, and the ability to access a computer cab become fatal barriers to an

individual's ability to participate" (p. 3). Other factors that could become barriers are in regards to the bonds made within the group. While it is important for members to work together and form connections, pre-existing bonds among members can hinder the integration of newcomers and, "A community can also become a clique when relationships among members are so strong that they overshadow all other concerns" (p. 3). Very strong relationships between certain members could lead to other members feeling isolated. Li et al. (2009) also explain that without new learners a community can fall apart, since it is the exchange of knowledge between the experts and the new learners that is the foundation of communities of practice. Without this rotation or cycle of knowledge renewal, the virtual community of practice will not foster change or improvements to the setting of practice.

Conclusion

Establishing a community of practice enables communities to incorporate different perspectives throughout a field of practice. This allows members to learn and share knowledge amongst each other. Within a community of practice, there are many elements that are needed to ensure the process runs smoothly. Collaboration opportunities, support, strong relationships, and commitment are all included. Through these elements, members of a community of practice can experience the many benefits of establishing a community of practice. However, with these benefits there may be challenges that arise. Many researchers have been able to contribute to the topic of

communities of practice; through their research we are able to gain a deeper

understanding of what is involved in communities of practice and their importance.

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