

Community of Practice

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A community of practice (CoP) is, according to cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, a group of people who share an interest, a craft, and/or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally (Lave & Wenger 1991). CoPs can exist online, such as within discussion boards and newsgroups, or in real life, such as in a lunch room at work, in a field setting, on a factory floor, or elsewhere in the environment.

While Lave and Wenger coined the term in the 1990s, this type of learning practice has existed for as long as people have been learning and sharing their experiences through storytelling.

Overview

Origin and development

Since the publication of "situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger 1991) in 1991, communities of practice have been the focus of attention, first as a theory of learning and later as part of the field of knowledge management. See (Hildreth & Kimble 2004) for a review of how the concept has changed over the years. Cox (2005) offers a more critical view of the different ways in which the term communities of practice can be interpreted.

Early years

To understand how learning occurs outside the classroom while at the Institute for Research on Learning, Lave and Wenger studied how newcomers or novices to informal groups become established members of those groups (Lave & Wenger 1991). Lave and Wenger first used the term communities of practice to describe learning through practice and participation, which they named situated learning.

The structure of the community was created over time through a process of legitimate peripheral participation. Legitimation and participation together define the characteristic ways of belonging to a community whereas peripherality and participation are concerned with location and identity in the social world (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 29).

Lave and Wenger's research looked at how apprenticeships help people learn. They found that when newcomers join an established group or community, they spend some time initially observing and perhaps performing simple tasks in basic roles as they learn how the group works and how they can participate (an apprentice electrician, for example would watch and learn before actually

doing any electrical work; initially taking on small simple jobs and eventually more complicated ones). Lave and Wenger described this socialization process as legitimate peripheral participation. The term "community of practice" is that group that Lave and Wenger referred to, who share a common interest and a desire to learn from and contribute to the community with their variety of experiences (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Later years

In his later work (Wenger 1998), Wenger abandoned the concept of legitimate peripheral participation and used the idea of an inherent tension in a duality instead. He identifies four dualities that exist in communities of practice, participation-reification, designed-emergent, identification-negotiability and local-global, although the participation-reification duality has been the focus of particular interest because of its links to knowledge management.

He describes the structure of a CoP as consisting of three interrelated terms: 'mutual engagement', 'joint enterprise' and 'shared repertoire' (Wenger 1998, pp. 72-73).

Mutual Engagement: Firstly, through participation in the community, members establish norms and build collaborative relationships; this is termed mutual engagement. These relationships are the ties that bind the members of the community together as a social entity.

Joint Enterprise: Secondly, through their interactions, they create a shared understanding of what binds them together; this is termed the joint enterprise. The joint enterprise is (re)negotiated by its members and is sometimes referred to as the 'domain' of the community.

Shared Repertoire: Finally, as part of its practice, the community produces a set of communal resources, which is termed their shared repertoire; this is used in the pursuit of their joint enterprise and can include both literal and symbolic meanings.

Present work

For Etienne Wenger, learning is central to human identity. A primary focus of Wenger's more recent work is on learning as social participation - the individual as an active participant in the practices of social communities, and in the construction of his/her identity through these communities (Wenger et. al 2004). In this context, a community of practice is a group of individuals participating in communal activity, and experiencing/continuously creating their shared identity through engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities.

The structural characteristics of a community of practice are again redefined to a domain of knowledge, a notion of community and a practice (Wenger et. al & 2004 pp 27 - 29).

Domain

A domain of knowledge creates common ground, inspires members to participate, guides their learning and gives meaning to their actions.

Community

The notion of a community creates the social fabric for that learning. A strong community fosters interactions and encourages a willingness to share ideas.

Practice

While the domain provides the general area of interest for the community, the practice is the specific focus around which the community develops, shares and maintains its core of knowledge.

In many organizations, communities of practice have become an integral part of the organization structure (McDermott & Archibald 2010). These communities take on knowledge stewarding tasks that were formerly covered by more formal organizational structures. In some organizations there are both formal and informal communities of practice. There is a great deal of interest within organizations to encourage, support, and sponsor communities of practice in order to benefit from shared knowledge that may lead to higher productivity (Wenger 2004). Communities of practice are now viewed by many in the business setting as a means to capturing the tacit knowledge, or the know-how that is not so easily articulated.

An important aspect and function of communities of practice is increasing organization performance. Lesser & Storck (2001, p. 836) identify four areas of organizational performance that can be affected by communities of practice:

- Decreasing the learning curve of new employees
- Responding more rapidly to customer needs and inquiries
- Reducing rework and preventing "reinvention of the wheel"
- Spawning new ideas for products and services

Examples of communities of practice

The communities Lave and Wenger studied were naturally forming as practitioners of craft and skill-based activities met to share experiences and insights (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Lave and Wenger observed situated learning within a community of practice among Yucatán midwives, native tailors, navy quartermasters and meat cutters (Lave & Wenger 1991) as well as insurance claims processors. (Wenger 1998). Other fields have made use of the concept of CoPs. Examples include education (Grossman 2001), sociolinguistics, material anthropology, and second language acquisition (Kimble, Hildreth & Bourdon 2008).

A famous example of a community of practice within an organization is that which developed around the Xerox customer service representatives who repaired the machines in the field (Brown & Duguid 2000). The Xerox reps began exchanging tips and tricks over informal meetings over breakfast or lunch and eventually Xerox saw the value of these interactions and created the Eureka project to allow these interactions to be shared across the global network of representatives. The Eureka database has been estimated to have saved the corporation 100\$ million.

Communities of practice compared to functional or project teams

A project team differs from a community of practice in several significant ways (McDermott, 1999).

A project team is driven by deliverables with shared goals, milestones and results.

A project team meets to share and exchange information and experiences just as the community of practice does, but team membership is defined by task.

A project team typically has designated members who remain consistent in their roles during the project.

A project team is dissolved once its mission is accomplished.

By contrast,

A community of practice is often organically created, with as many objectives as members of that community.

Community membership is defined by the knowledge of the members. CoP membership changes and members may take on new roles within the community as interests and needs arise.

A community of practice can exist as long as the members believe they have something to contribute to it, or gain from it.

Communities of Practice versus Communities of Interest

In addition to the distinction between CoP and other types of organizational groupings found in the workplace, in some cases it is useful to differentiate CoP from Communities of Interest (CoI).

Community of Interest

A group of people interested in sharing information and discussing a particular topic that interests them.

Members are not necessarily experts or practitioners of the topic around which the CoI has formed. The purpose of the CoI is to provide a place where people who share a common interest can go and exchange information, ask questions, and express their opinions about the topic.

Membership in a CoI is not dependent upon expertise - one only needs to be interested in the

subject.

Community of Practice

A CoP, in contrast, is a group of people who are active practitioners.

CoP participation is not appropriate for non-practitioners.

The purpose of a CoP, as discussed above, is to provide a way for practitioners to share tips and best practices, ask questions of their colleagues, and provide support for each other.

Membership is dependent on expertise - one should have at least some recent experience performing in the role or subject area of the CoP.

Example: Someone who is interested in photography and has some background/training in it finds an online CoP for working photojournalists, who use it to discuss various aspects of their work. Since this community is focused on working photojournalists, it would not be appropriate for an amateur photographer to contribute to the CoP discussions there. Depending on the CoPs structure non-CoP members may have access to reading the discussions and accessing other materials of the community.

Communities of practice and knowledge management

Wasko and Faraj (2000) describe three kinds of knowledge: "knowledge as object", "knowledge embedded within individuals", and "knowledge embedded in a community". Communities of Practice have become associated with finding, sharing, transferring, and archiving knowledge, as well as making explicit "expertise", or tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is considered to be those valuable context-based experiences that can not easily be captured, codified and stored (Davenport & Prusak 2000), also (Hildreth & Kimble 2002).

Because knowledge management is seen "primarily as a problem of capturing, organizing, and retrieving information, evoking notions of databases, documents, query languages, and data mining" (Thomas, Kellogg & Erickson 2001), the community of practice, collectively and individually, is considered a rich potential source of helpful information in the form of actual experiences; in other words, best practices.

Thus, for knowledge management, a community of practice is one source of content and context that if codified, documented and archived can be accessed for later use.

Benefit of community of practice

Social capital

Social capital is said to be a multi-dimensional concept, with both public and private facets (Putnam 2001). That is, acquiring social capital gives value to both the individual and the group as

a whole, in which the social capital is generated. Through informal connections that participants make in their community of practice, and in the formal process of sharing their expertise, learning from others, and participating in the group, members are said to be acquiring social capital - or a trust that members build between themselves and others that can lead to better communication. Thus, CoPs are considered a way to gain social capital, especially to those members who demonstrate expertise and experience.

Factors of a successful community of practice

Individuals in communities of practice

Members of communities of practice are thought to be more efficient and effective conduits of information and experiences. While organizations tend to provide manuals to meet the training needs of their employees, CoP's help foster the process of storytelling among colleagues which, in turn, helps them strengthen their skills on the job. (Seely Brown & Duguid 1991)

Studies have shown that workers spend a third of their time looking for information and are five times more likely to turn to a co-worker rather than an explicit source of information (book, manual, or database) (Davenport & Prusak 2000). Time is saved by conferring with members of a CoP. Members of the community have tacit knowledge, which can be difficult to store and retrieve outside. For example, one person can share the best way to handle a situation based on his experiences, which may enable the other person to avoid mistakes and shorten the learning curve. In a CoP, members can openly discuss and brainstorm about a project, which can lead to new capabilities. The type of information that is shared and learned in a CoP is boundless (Dalkir 2005). Duguid (2005) clarifies the difference between tacit knowledge, or knowing how, and explicit knowledge, or knowing what. Performing optimally in a job requires being able to convert theory into practice. Communities of practice help the individual bridge the gap between knowing what and knowing how. (Duguid 2005)

As members of communities of practice, individuals report increased communication with people (professionals, interested parties, hobbyists), less dependence on geographic proximity, and the generation of new knowledge. (Ardichvilli, Page & Wentling 2003)

Social presence

Communicating with others in a community of practice involves creating social presence. Tu (2002) defines social presence as "the degree of salience of another person in an interaction and the consequent salience of an interpersonal relationship" (p. 38). It is believed that social presence affects how likely an individual is of participating in a COP (especially in online environments). (Tu 2002) Management of a community of practice often faces many barriers that inhibit individuals

from engaging in knowledge exchange. Some of the reasons for these barriers are egos and personal attacks, large overwhelming COP's, and time constraints (Wasko & Faraj 2000)

Motivation

Motivation to share knowledge is critical to success in communities of practice. Studies show that members are motivated to become active participants in a CoP when they view knowledge as meant for the public good, a moral obligation and/or as a community interest (Ardichvilli, Page & Wentling 2003). Members of a community of practice can also be motivated to participate by using methods such as tangible returns (promotion, raises or bonuses), intangible returns (reputation, self-esteem) and community interest (exchange of practice related knowledge, interaction).

Collaboration

Collaboration is essential to ensuring that communities of practice thrive. Research has found that certain factors can indicate a higher level of collaboration in knowledge exchange in a business network (Sveiby & Simon 2002). Sveiby and Simons found that more seasoned colleagues tend to foster a more collaborative culture. Additionally they noted that a higher educational level also predicts a tendency to favor collaboration.

Actions to cultivate a successful community of practice

What makes a community of practice succeed depends on the purpose and objective of the community as well as the interests and resources of the members of that community. Wenger identified seven actions that could be taken in order to cultivate communities of practice:

Design the community to evolve naturally - Because the nature of a Community of Practice is dynamic, in that the interests, goals, and members are subject to change, CoP forums should be designed to support shifts in focus.

Create opportunities for open dialog within and with outside perspectives - While the members and their knowledge are the CoP's most valuable resource, it is also beneficial to look outside of the CoP to understand the different possibilities for achieving their learning goals.

Welcome and allow different levels of participation - Wenger identifies 3 main levels of participation. 1) The core group who participate intensely in the community through discussions and projects. This group typically takes on leadership roles in guiding the group 2) The active group who attend and participate regularly, but not to the level of the leaders. 3) The peripheral group who, while they are passive participants in the community, still learn from their level of involvement. Wenger notes the third group typically represents the majority of the community.

Develop both public and private community spaces - While CoP's typically operate in public spaces

where all members share, discuss and explore ideas, they should also offer private exchanges. Different members of the CoP could coordinate relationships among members and resources in an individualized approach based on specific needs.

Focus on the value of the community - CoP's should create opportunities for participants to explicitly discuss the value and productivity of their participation in the group.

Combine familiarity and excitement - CoP's should offer the expected learning opportunities as part of their structure, and opportunities for members to shape their learning experience together by brainstorming and examining the conventional and radical wisdom related to their topic.

Find and nurture a regular rhythm for the community - CoP's should coordinate a thriving cycle of activities and events that allow for the members to regularly meet, reflect, and evolve. The rhythm, or pace, should maintain an anticipated level of engagement to sustain the vibrancy of the community, yet not be so fast-paced that it becomes unwieldy and overwhelming in its intensity. (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002)