

## Communities of Practice – From Own to Shared Knowledge

A co-production of Ernst Bolliger, Ueli Scheuermeier, Tonino Zelleweger (all LBL) and Arthur Zimmermann (odcp-consult)

**Communities of Practice (CoP) – a new term in the domain of international co-operation. Is it just a new buzzword? Or what is it all about?**

**This article aims to investigate the background and practical examples so as to shed some light on the term and mark it out.**

**A metaphor (Vikings) brings us to the centre of life. In the section “From own to shared knowledge” we are closing in on the daily grind and the establishment of a CoP.**

**A certain work form can be better recognised if differences compared with other, related, forms are clear.**

**And ultimately practical examples are always helpful when it comes to finding one’s way in the jungle of forms and colours.**

### **CoPs and Vikings –**

(a metaphor to understand the nature of a Community of Practice)

Vikings roamed the rough northern seas in their very well made ships. Each man had an oar and rowed. One or two guys took care of the steering.

The rowers were free men, having opted to join the group on their own free will in order to go “Viking” together. The group was initiated by an enterprising (and sometimes rich) leader, who took care that a ship was built. Then he looked for fellow crew members, who would join him on the ship. They were not paid. Each crew-member took his seaman’s chest along to sit on while rowing. It held his own personal belongings. Usually the initiator took care of steering, but the crew could always insist that another took the steering oar,

if it turned out that he knew the coast better. And off they went into the sea, to explore, to settle.

And often women were on board too, particularly when the idea was to settle on a faraway coast. The women knew about that better than men. They had a high standing because they managed the economy.

A Community of Practice is like a boat full of Vikings:

- There is no strict hierarchy on board. The steering is more or less mandated on a ship, as is the facilitation of a CoP.
- A CoP can only achieve anything if the members volunteer to move it along, as with the ship that doesn’t move unless the rowers agree to row in a coordinated manner.
- Each member must bring along his/her expertise and resources, as with the rowers who each sit on their own seaman’s chest and bring along an oar.
- A CoP needs an infrastructure to be effective, as with the ship of the Vikings. Nothing happens without a ship.
- CoPs are often initiated by a small group of committed people, as with the Vikings where an enterprising leader looks for likeminded people who plan the voyage, then look for crew members who may join.
- CoPs cannot be ordered to happen, as with the Vikings, where the setting up of a crew was a matter of free will. The crews were “gangs” in their own right.
- Members of a CoP do a lot of other things, too, as with members of a Viking crew, who could switch from “Viking” to settling or switch to another crew, if they wished. However, the analogy breaks here: In a modern CoP a member can be simultaneously in a job and in various CoPs, whereas a member

of a Viking crew had to stay on board as long as they were at sea.

- Learning happens all the time among members of a CoP, as with the Vikings, where the newcomers learned from other crew members who had been along a coast before on earlier forays, and the younger ones learn from the more experienced.
- There is no objective or mission that could be accomplished, as with the Vikings, who learn about “Viking”. There might be single objectives like getting to a place and doing something there. But the real skill of the Vikings was, that they could repeatedly and reliably cross the rough seas and arrive fit for settling or fighting. That was “Viking”. This seamanship was the “art” that made the Vikings so successful (and their skills at statesmanship. I wonder how the two arts/skills interacted). This art of seamanship needed to be cultivated. It was cultivated on the ships during voyages. It was their “practice”. As with a CoP: It cultivates an art, a skill, a practice – it’s not a one-shot affair.

### A Practical Procedure on Establishing Communities of Practice

*Communities of Practice* are places of learning where we find out what others already know and can do and where others find out what we know and can do. The following is a brief description:

- A CoP has a **subject** which is of interest to people with different backgrounds and different perspectives
- In a CoP prime importance is attached to **practical experience** and **questions**.

The members exchange experiences and jointly search for possible answers to their questions and practical procedures for solving problems.

- A CoP **organises itself**: the members agree on the scope and demarcation of the subject, work and exchange forms or joint products.
- A CoP must be **fun** so that it is personally enriching.

The various subject areas in all the EZA organisations contain a wealth of experience and knowledge pertain-

ing to strategies, procedures and good practice, and are worth exchanging: The following are examples of possible subjects for *knowledge sharing*:

- Controlling multilateral financing: SWAPs, Basket Funding
- Interfaces between humanitarian assistance and the EZA
- Conflict mediation as part of the programmes
- Public Private Development Partnerships (PPDPs)
- Local democratic development
- Competitive Funds
- Finance administration
- Social Forestry
- Micro Irrigation
- ICT4D
- ...

We believe that there is no single method and no single ideal and correct way to exchange experience and knowledge. A CoP is an à la carte menu. The following **proposal** describes, in three practical steps, the form best suited to sharing experience and knowledge.

#### 1. Declaration of intent and starting situation

- In a discussion describe the **subject** on which experience and knowledge are to be shared.
- Outline the group of **participants** who are to be primarily targeted.
- Gain access to the existing **information** on the subject.
- Create a suggestion for an **impulse action** aimed at the target group and determining in greater detail the further procedure.

#### 2. Impulse action

- Organise an impulse action. This amounts to establishing contact per Internet or a brief workshop with potential partners. On the one hand the impulse action serves the purpose of taking the participant’s pulse (how much interest does he show?, what is troubling him?). On the other hand the matter is concerned with arousing *feu sacré* and drawing up thematic *knowledge mapping*.

- Evaluate the experience gained from the impulse action and create a suggestion for the **further procedure**. For example a *Community of Practice*. Or another suitable form.

### 3. Tailor-made form of practical knowledge management in a CoP

- On the basis of the impulse action specify the **essence and purpose** of the *Community of Practice* for the start-up phase. At a later date the members of the *Community determine* the further development.
- Develop the **form and process** of the *Community of Practice* on the basis of the various options:
  - More narrow or wide-ranging approach to themes,
  - Geographical concentration or global,
  - Meeting and exchange face-to-face or more virtual ICT-supported,
  - Open or more closed for all possible participants,
  - Without parameters or geared towards specific knowledge products,
  - With or without communications rules,
  - Limited in time or open.

- Clarify the **rolls** in the *Community of Practice* with a small core group.
- Present the *Community of Practice* on the basis of the selected options. In this initial phase render visible in dealings with internal and external parties in particular the **conspicuousness** of the work of the *Community of Practice*.
- Evaluate the experience gained with those participating in the *Community of Practice* and report on the results and on further **development possibilities**.

### What are relevant differences between a CoP and other forms of co-operating groups?

1988, in a workshop on farming systems research, a researcher resumed one of his key lessons: “What we discussed during this workshop, principles, procedures, roles, rules, communication patterns, ... it is just that what we practised for the last ten years in our collaborative research projects. I am happy to know how you officially call what we are doing.”

This anecdote brings to the point what can happen to you when you start talking of CoP to someone. You might get the answer: “That’s exactly, what we are doing ever since.”

Nevertheless lets try to characterise some current forms of cooperating groups and identify major differences to a CoP.

This is just an attempt to “define” some names frequently used and heard. Maybe, for practical purpose it is more useful to have a set of questions that help understanding what forms of interaction other people are speaking of.

- Who is participating? Are there active and passive members? Who decides about the participation? What is the commitment when participating?

Typical Development Stages	
Phases	Associated pictures
1 I know – you know – we might know better Someone feels the need to interact with peers	Germination
2 A core group starts a discussion of a domain and discovers power in this interaction. Encouraging experience ⇔ eager for more	„Rütlichschwur“ = the meeting of three core members
3 Lobbying by phone, mail, meetings, talks along workshops and congresses.	Networking, Lobbying, Membership, Looking for affiliates Forming phase
4 Structuring an interaction (phases and places of discussion): Contributions in journals, discussion on platforms and in e-mails – intermediate results – conclusions of discussions. Structuring the core group and outer group (role differentiation: owner – worker – facilitator – expert).	Adventure group Storming and norming phase
5 Workshops (physical meetings) around core subjects ⇔ striving for concrete results.	Living and learning within a CoP Performing phase

Description of the cooperating group	Tentative main differences to a CoP
<b>Group for experience sharing:</b> Frequent among (young) professionals for sharing their experience. Often guided by a facilitator / animator and limited in time to e.g. two years. Also reflection of professional practice (↔ supervision groups).	Oriented at participants with similar working situation. (a loose form of a CoP)
<b>Working Circle (Germ. „Arbeitskreis“):</b> A closed interest group aiming at improving economical fitness of the enterprises of its members. Members act as experts with external facilitation.	Closed circle; fixed working cycles (a closed form of a CoP)
<b>Interest Group:</b> Group of persons interested in a subject. Inviting experts and sharing experience. Open groups, mainly guided by an animator.	Relatively passive role of participants
<b>Info-Network:</b> Common subject or area of activities. Normally a loose net with the possibility to interact on demand (exchange of information, question – answer)	Loose form, low commitment
<b>Working Group:</b> Mainly created within institutions to work on defined issues, tasks. Result oriented. Often very limited in time.	Nominated and task given by superior
<b>Task Force:</b> Similar as a working group, but often bigger tasks and more intensity within a short laps of time.	Short term problem / result oriented
<b>Quality circle:</b> Normally a formally installed group within an institution aiming at improving the quality of a process / product.	Nominated by the management; quality oriented
<b>Self Help Group:</b> Persons with similar problems gather for mutual help (support, information, experience). Frequent for health and addiction.	Personal stress situation

- What is the domain of interaction (theme, subject)? Who defines it?
- What is the aim of the interaction? Is it personal or institutional oriented (or both)?
- What results have been achieved so far? What results are expected? Who defines it?
- What is the estimated duration of the interaction?
- What is the size of the group? What is the inner structure of the group? What roles can be differentiated?
- How is the working climate of the group? Where does the information / knowledge / experience come from?
- What are the working tools of the group?
- How is the group financed? By the members? By their organisations?

### CoP Example: Skills Development in Rural Areas

This is a recent example, actually the early history of a future Community of Practice. And perhaps it is of interest for that very reason.

#### History

A representative in the specialist “Work and Income” section of SDC has an uneasy feeling: the work that has been performed to date in occupational development may not even have any effects on the rural areas. With the new interest shown in the rural development, the vocational training should make an appearance with concepts that have really been tested regarding their suitability to the rural circumstances and requirements.

During a coffee break at an event, he puts this to the representatives of the relocated “Rural Development” competency centre. Three of them continue to work at the subject and start developing initial concepts. They gather basic material for the concepts with a

rotating Word file. The formulated concepts are now being discussed in a wider ranging group. Additional people from the group of SDC and its affiliated institutions debate the concepts on an Internet platform with a presenter. It is envisaged that the final outcome be a basic paper, which proposes guidelines for “Skills development in rural areas.”

If you would like to find out more on this subject read the call page 13 of this BN. The website: [www.skilldevrural.net](http://www.skilldevrural.net) also provides information and how to join up.

### **Example CoP: Tax Administration in Districts, Ecuador**

#### **1 Early history and background**

A small town mayor, who complained bitterly during a meeting of the national association of municipalities about the delayed transfer payments of the central state, initiated the establishment of a *Comunidad de Aprendizaje*. Other mayors took to the floor and struck the same note: the transfer payments were delayed, and were conditional on the mayor’s membership card and nebulous preferential treatment, while the municipalities were saddled with ever more tasks. The lively discussion ultimately ended up establishing a cross-party commission of mayors to make political advances in the finance ministry and directly with the President.

Another mayor was not satisfied with the political advances: he pointed out that the municipalities could also strive for improvements in the case of direct taxes and duties at a municipal level. For example in tax administration in the municipality, in the case of imposing taxes, budget planning, updating the land register, tax relief for companies or in the case of imposing duties on special services. He was interested in finding out how other municipalities addressed this question of tax administration ...

After a number of other speakers had already outlined practical examples from their municipalities, it was decided at the meeting to create a small group of interested municipalities as *Comunidad de Aprendizaje*.

#### **2 Process and products**

Of the country’s 224 municipalities, some 80 are grouped together in the *Comunidad de Aprendizaje* after a single year. The founding group drew up an open agenda on the subject of tax administration at municipal level. Several municipalities formed groups regarding each subject to illustrate and exchange their experiences. Prime importance was attached to the exchange of practical experience in this initial and rather informal phase. The interest of the participants from the municipalities largely determined which questions were processed. A specific proposal for the further education of local government officers woke the association of municipalities from its long sleep. A second phase began as the association of the *Comunidad de Aprendizaje* made available a platform on the Internet where, in the meantime, access can be gained to initial products by all members of the *Comunidad de Aprendizaje*: a series of good practices on imposing taxes, a further education module for municipality administration officers, simple procedures on updating the real estate register and a cost-neutral proposal aimed at improving budget planning.

#### **3 Future prospects**

The *Comunidad de Aprendizaje* continued to develop in two directions: on the one hand new municipalities are joining up, i.e. it is growing. On the other products are being created, which have proved successful in practice and have spread quickly among the members. The *Comunidad de Aprendizaje* is confronted with an unexpected side effect in the professional approach adopted in the policies of the association of municipalities. In the meantime it has become more active and as part of the discussion on decentralisation can underpin the municipalities’ political interests with practical and technical arguments.

#### **A Final Hint**

“Cultivating Communities of Practice” is the title of Etienne Wenger’s contribution on <http://www.ewenger.com>. Here a short overview of what he declares to be the core aspects of a CoP.

