

Communities of Practice (CoP) – From Own to Shared Knowledge

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Communities of Practice (CoP) – a new term in development and co-operation? Is it just another trendy expression or is there something new behind it?

In this paper we reflect the idea and the background of the term “Communities of Practice”. A few selected concrete examples illustrate the reflections.

A Community of Practice (COP) is a group of committed people

A Community of Practice is a group of committed people with the concern of sharing their expertise and knowledge in a common domain of their professional activities in order to perform their tasks on a high quality level. Knowledge sharing and learning is stimulated by problems and challenges of the professional practice, and thus is action oriented.

Communities of Practice exist without formal hierarchy; their structure is function oriented. Members participate mainly based on their own interest and motivation, less based on a clearly defined task of their organisation.

In brief, this is what we understand to be a Community of Practice – a CoP. But let’s start with a metaphor that may help to explain the spirit behind a CoP.

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 similar to a boat of Vikings:

- There is no strict hierarchy on board. The steering was more or less mandated on the Viking’s ship, as is the facilitation of a COP.
- There is a mandate for the whole expedition between the community back home and the crew on board (trade, new territories, etc.).
- A COP can only achieve something if the members engage to get things moving, 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 some kind of a structure to be effective; Vikings need a boat for discovering new territories.
- COPs are most often initiated by a small group of committed people, as with the Vikings where an enterprising leader looks for a couple of likeminded people who plan the trip, then they 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. The Viking crew as well switched from “viking” to settling, if they wished. However here, there is a limitation in the analogy: Today, a COP 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 younger ones learned from more experienced crew members who had been travelling along a coast on earlier forays.
- 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.

The six essentials of a Community of Practice

According to our experience, three essentials are obvious; another three are hidden.

The three obvious aspects help to differentiate a community of practice from other forms of information sharing or working together: **Community – Domain – Practice.**

- (1) There is a **Community**. A Community has active members (more and less active ones). Being a community represents something special for the members. There is a lively interest for the community and its topics. And the community has a certain priority. It is not just “the thing I am doing after six in the evening”. Members like to meet and to share.
- (2) There is a **Domain**. A CoP has a clear domain, a thematic orientation, neither too narrow nor too large. This domain is relevant and meaningful for the members; they are interested in this specific domain.
- (3) There is a **Practice**. Each and every member has his/her own practice within the domain of the CoP and members know about each others’ practice. The own practice serves as a kind of check-reality, when sharing experience, concepts and strategies. Verifying in the own practice what is shared and discussed in theory is one of the essentials of a CoP.

Three essentials are hidden: **Motivation, Mandate and Structure.**

- (4) There is a **Motivation**. A CoP exists only through the motivation of its members, visible in their personal interest and in the priority they attribute to the CoP in their daily activities.
- (5) There is a **Mandate**. The mandate of the concerned organisation(s) defines on one side the thematic focus with the declared interest of the organisation in a concrete outcome; on the other side, the mandate gives open space for self commitment to its members (working time and financial resources).
- (6) There is an **informal structure**. Finally, a CoP is a structure beyond organisational boxes and lines. Most CoPs make a link between organisational units and between organisations. Horizontal and diagonal links are very typical for a CoP.

Benefit of a Community of Practice for its members and its organisations

The most prominent benefits of a community of practice for its members are:

- Ensuring access to relevant knowledge – explicit knowledge available in institutions and with individuals and tacit knowledge living with individuals;
- Ensuring the quality of knowledge and knowledge management for the concerned organisations;
- Getting access to experienced persons in the respective domain;
- Quickly finding common ground for jointly implemented projects.

According to our observation, CoPs contribute to improving quality and sustainability of projects and programmes, increasing the potential for innovation, reducing risk factors and finally influencing organisational change.

The basic structure of a Community of Practice

Most communities of practice have a kind of a three-fold circle structure. A core group, an inner circle and an outer circle.

The core group acts as a kind of managing group. It coordinates the activities and assures the work of a secretariat.

The inner circle is a kind of a steering committee, meeting once or twice a year. Individual members of the inner circle may be in contact with the core group on demand.

The outer circle consists of interested members. They are contributors and clients of the CoP.

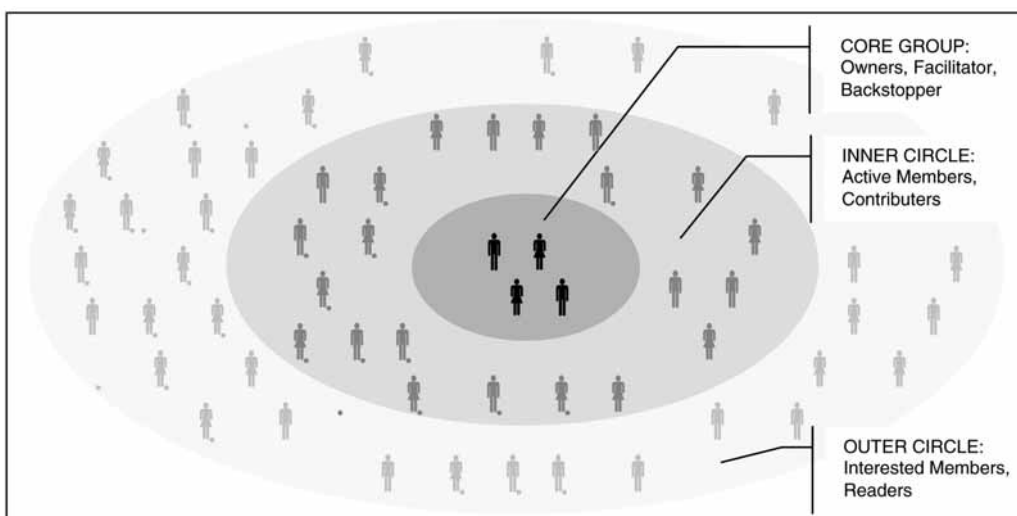
A Community of Practice is a group of peers

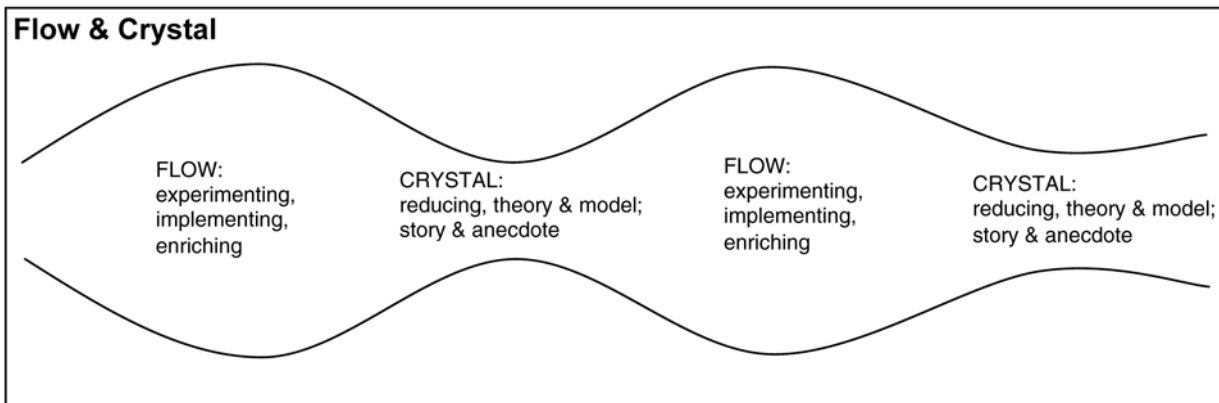
Communities of Practice aim at sharing knowledge among the members. Knowledge sharing combines two things: Communicating knowledge and valorising the gained knowledge.

If I want to share knowledge I need to find an appropriate form for doing so. It does not mean transferring data or pumping information into one another's brains. It is a question of reducing the own vast and rich experience into a meaningful form of presentation. A frequent form is a mix of theory and models combined with anecdotes and stories.

The knowledge gained from others needs to be applied and verified in my own reality. Does the theory hold true in my conditions? How do partner-organisations react? The theory gets an enrichment in my own situation; there is a new process of implementation and experimentation.

The graph on next page shows the sequence of steps.





Differences between a CoP and other forms of cooperating groups

Let us start this discussion with an anecdote: A couple of years ago, 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, ... is just what we did for the last ten years in our collaborative research projects. I am happy to know at least, 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 their main differences to a CoP.

Description of the cooperating group	Tentative main differences to a CoP
Group for experience sharing: Frequent among (young) professionals who want to share their experience. Often guided by a facilitator / animator and limited in time to e.g. two years. Also reflection of professional practice (→ supervision groups).	participants with similar working situation. (a loose form of a CoP)
Working Circle (in German: „Arbeitskreis“): 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)
Interest Group: Group of persons interested in a topic. Inviting experts and sharing experience. Open groups, with facilitation.	relatively passive role of participants
Info-Network: Common topic or area of activities. Normally a loose net with the possibility to interact on demand (exchange of information, question – answer)	loose form, low commitment
Working Group: mainly created within institutions to work on defined issues, tasks. Result oriented. Often very limited in time.	nominated and task given by superior
Task Force: A group of specialists working on a task given by the management, often under time pressure.	short term problem / result oriented
Quality circle: A formally installed group within an institution aiming at improving the quality of a process / product.	nominated by the management; quality oriented

In practice, a set of questions might help to understand whether we are speaking of a CoP or another form of interaction.

Key question	Typical answer when speaking of a CoP
What is the size of the group?	Open, between 10 and 100, or even more.
Who is participating? What is the commitment?	Interested professionals, committed by personal professional interest.
What is the inner structure of the group? What roles can be differentiated?	Informal structure, no hierarchy. Core group with owners, experts and facilitator; inner circle with active participants; open for interested people (outer circle).
What is the domain of concern (theme, topic)? Who defines it?	A clearly defined domain (= thematic field), defined by owners and active participants.
What is the aim of the interaction?	Increase the quality standard of the professional work through access to relevant information, knowledge and experience.
To what extent motivation and interest are personal and to what extent mandated by the institution?	Personal interest is predominant. The institutions declare their interest in general terms.
What kind of results are expected? Who defines them?	No strict planning of activities and results. Often concrete results are the outcome of a process, not planned, but happening by chance.
What is the planned duration of the interaction?	Open, depending on funding. Reviews prove the value (outcome and concrete results) of a CoP. A CoP exists as long as it serves the members and member organisations. Without concrete results, a CoP is to be closed down.
How is the working mood of the group?	A high commitment by the members is very typical for a CoP.
Where does the information / knowledge / experience come from?	Mainly by the active participants (inner circle and core group); external experts may be consulted.
What are the working tools of the group?	Networking, workshops, peer exchange, peer review, joint projects, joint evaluations, joint planning, etc.
How is the group financed? Who has an interest in its financing?	Financing through interested organisations (funds and working time).

Examples of CoPs

Examples	Short characteristics with regard to CoP-features
AGUASAN	<p>A group of water supply specialists started in 1983 with a knowledge sharing event that was highly appreciated. In the following years a stable core group went on keeping the AGUASAN group alive. The main purpose was experience sharing and knowledge generating in the domain of water and sanitation.</p> <p>Every year, up to 4 meetings of the core group and a one week workshop with some 30 participants and changing resource persons are the key activities.</p> <p>→ A „Community of Practice“, that is facing the handing over to a next generation. www.skafoundation.org</p>
Thematic Groups World Bank	<p>Roughly 80 working groups within the World Bank System deal with different topics, partly as internal groups, partly with external participation. They have a general mandate and certain means (secretarial support) of the Bank; they all are accountable to the Bank for results / outcome.</p> <p>These working groups are reported to be a success story of the World Bank and serve as examples for CoPs in the field of International Cooperation.</p> <p>→ Inter-linked Communities of Practice within one big organisation. http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/WBI/0,,contentMDK:20212531~menuPK:575906~pagePK:209023~piPK:207535~theSitePK:213799,00.html</p>

SDRA: Skills Development in Rural Areas	<p>A group of experts and practitioners in vocational training and rural development are leading an internet discussion on SDRA. The objective is to elaborate working guidelines for SDRA. The internet discussion is a first step, followed by a face-to-face workshop and an option for a future CoP.</p> <p>Mandate and financial resources by SDC's section Employment and Income.</p> <p>→ A Community of Practice in its first stage; the facilitator is speaking of a "Proto-CoP", that might become a CoP after the face-to-face workshop.</p> <p>www.skilldevrural.net</p>
SDC-finance	<p>Specialists of the finance administration of SDC headquarters and COOFs started an electronic discussion platform, administrated and facilitated by staff of the headquarters. In the centre of the activities are Questions & Answers. A lively participation, quick answers to raised questions, no facilitated or structured discussion of conceptual issues so far.</p> <p>→ Functions as a virtual self help group; offers the possibility to evolve in specialised Communities of Practice (as „off-springs“).</p>
SDC-finance-Asia	<p>After a regional workshop in spring 2004, a group of finance administrators from two sections of SDC started a common electronic platform (<sdc-finance-asia>), with an administrator.</p> <p>The intention is to discuss conceptual issues of regional importance in addition to the Q&A practice within <sdc-finance>.</p> <p>→ The group is about to form a Community of Practice.</p>
SDC-aids	<p>Initiated in a workshop in 2002, South and East Africa section staff formed a closed discussion group about HIV-AIDS.</p> <p>The group maintains an electronic platform (<sdc-aids>).</p> <p>It started with the exchange of interesting documents; in 2003 facilitated discussions about selected conceptual issues followed.</p> <p>→ Presents many elements of a Community of Practice.</p>
Network of Ethnologists	<p>Interested group of ethnologists working at SDC headquarters. Initiated and coordinated by a key person.</p> <p>The network acts according to self set rules and topics; members are meeting regularly.</p> <p>→ Community of Interest with the potential to evolve in a Community of Practice.</p>
SDC-knowledge	<p>Electronic platform initiated by the thematic service „Knowledge and Research“ for the exchange about conceptual issues regarding knowledge management within Swiss International Cooperation and the SDC knowledge management.</p> <p>→ Started as a Community of Interest; without noticeable activities as yet. Will be closed down soon.</p>

Typical development stages of a CoP

Every CoP has its own story, its own history. Knowing this (hi-)story is a key to the correct understanding of the nature and the development potential of a CoP. As every organisational form, a CoP develops through different stages of "live" – from creation to extinction.

CoPs take off based on a felt and expressed strong need. CoPs position themselves in a broader organisational setting. CoPs die, whenever the need is satisfied, the potential exhausted, the job done.

CoPs tend to exist the longer, the more they manage to produce useful and recognised results. The more results are produced, the more new topics emerge, giving additional life-energy to a CoP.

	Phases	Associated pictures
1	I know – you know – we together might know better Someone feels the need to interact with peers	Germination, creation
2	A core group starts a discussion in a domain and discovers a lively interest in this interaction. Encouraging experience → eager for more	„The holy swear“ = the meeting of at least three core members as founding group

3	Lobbying by phone, mail, meetings, informal talks during workshops and congresses. The attention and the interest of relevant people is increasing.	Growing of a group
4	Structuring the interaction (phases and places of discussion): Contributions in journals, discussion on platforms and in e-mails – intermediate results – conclusions of discussions. The core group and the outer group get structured: owner – worker – facilitator – expert.	Adventure group
5	Workshops (face to face meetings) around core topics → striving for concrete results. Most prominent phase for concrete products.	Living and learning within a CoP
6	Phasing out: The domain of the CoP is getting less relevant or changes completely. A re-orientation may open a new direction. The end of the activities creates room for new initiatives.	Mission accomplished, happy end, last event

Important issues

Experience shows, that the development of a CoP crosses various critical stages that are prone for mistakes and failures. The following issues need particular attention in building and promoting CoPs:

Issues	Needs special attention
Composition of members of a CoP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring in the key-stakeholders • The practice must take into account the heterogeneity of the members: some primarily represent their organisations or organisational units, others represent themselves
Communication among the members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The different members have varying needs of being connected. • Balance the important face to face meetings with other forms of staying in contact.
Rules and roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CoPs work best in a informal (non-hierarchical) way. • But even informality needs basic rules of communication and collaboration (define responsibility and accountability) and a common agreement • Take care for the key roles in the inner circle (owner, manager, expert, facilitator, ...) especially in handing over phases
Flow of “energy”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep away from routine • Balance between giving and taking among members • Care for commitment, affinity and trust • From time to time a face to face event increases the energy • Keep the history of the CoP alive repeat it to new members
Linking different realities (including field realities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each member brings in his/her reality based on their background and competence
Changes of content and members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay open to changing priorities be it of member organisations or in the wider environment • Be prepared for changing (core) members
Applicability of results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A common concern is more likely to produce tangible results • Formulate clearly identified issues and go for useful and tangible products • Make the insights and lessons accessible to others
Ownership of results and the process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful results make the CoP attractive for the member organisation and at the same time justify the process for reaching these results
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members must be able to reserve enough time for a CoP; evenings and weekends are not sufficient. • Member organisations must be willing to provide time and money • A step by step planning keeps members and their organisations in touch with the CoP

Mode of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The core group must keep up a close contact and sometimes put some other members "under pressure"• Some members are grateful for suggestions be it for a closer collaboration be it for the application of results• Present results and outcome to a wider public
Key assumptions in a CoP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Members look for a direct and practical benefit• Listening to others is a virtue• Members are willing to give without expectation of an immediate return• A reflecting group produces new and useful ideas• Diversity in thinking and in looking at common issues are allowed and welcome

... in short:

- Make sure key stakeholders are members
- Be aware of the specificity of the subject (domain)
- Care for shared internal rules, a code of conduct
- Keep the energy flowing
- Create links between (different) stakeholders and their realities
- Adjust to changes in the environment
- Strive for most practical and tangible outputs/outcomes
- Stay aware of ownership
- Make the resources available
- Select carefully the ways of communication, of "being connected"
- Focus on the value of the CoP for the members

Useful links to the Internet

Etienne Wenger, author of "Cultivating Communities of Practice": <http://www.ewenger.com/>

SDC is offering a service "**Coaching for CoP**". Details you find under: <http://www.lbl.ch/internat/>

Still more? If this is not enough food for thought, please check in the internet under <http://www.google.ch/> ... enter CoP into the search engine ... and you will find another 5 to 6 million entries about CoP, COP, Cop and cop, in all their meanings, from "Community of Practice" to "Policeman". And every day, there are more!

Here a copy of the “Quick start-up guide for a CoP”

