**41 Developing Project Management Capability through Communities of Practice**

*Brief: Exploring how communities of practice, forums and formal/informal networks can operate to help organisations and individual practitioners develop their project management capability. How can these groups be set up; what form and structure do they take; what mechanism and tools are needed; how to engage people; what are the benefits and outcomes. Share real life examples of how to go about creating a CoP.*

**1 Introduction and Definition of a community of practice (CoP)**

*“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”* Etienne Wenger[[1]](#footnote-1)

Other chapters have explored formal training and accreditation – the traditional route to developing capability. However, it is now clearly demonstrated in the field of learning and knowledge management that most development of capability does not take place in the classroom or in front of a text book. Rather our capability and certainly mastery of a subject develops in the practice of doing the job and through learning from our colleagues.

Have you learned more about the software on your PC from training courses and manuals or by asking for help from the person next to you or picking up the shortcuts from watching others? For many of us it is the latter.

The concept of communities of practice recognizes this reality about the way our capability develops and seeks to capitalize on it. Communities of practice consciously encourage and strengthen peer to peer learning. The concept should not be seen as technical or different from the kind of collaborative activity we naturally plan and engage in. Rather it is about a more conscious and planned approach to this activity and a focus on how to maximize the learning that can result. Community of Practice learning can also be “blended” with formal learning.

This chapter describes what a community of practice is and the different forms they can take. It provides two case studies of successful project and programme management CoPs. There are practical tips based on experience on how to develop a successful community and factors to consider in terms of the context of your CoP. Finally it talks about the benefits of communities of practice both to individuals and to organizations.

**2 Communities of practice - different forms and approaches**

**2.1 Description**

A community of practice may be a virtual group where members never or rarely meet (for example in a multi-national corporation or a nation-wide interest group) or it may exist primarily through face to face interactions of individuals in a single organization in one location.

It may be a single functional group across multiple organizations (e.g. project managers) or a multi-functional group within a single organization. For example, those involved in change within an organization which could include service manager, support functions and project managers).

It could be focused on content (for example climate change) or process, for example change management.

There may be different sub-groups within a community who will engage in it in quite different ways. Some may not even be aware that they are members of the community but are invited along to particular events. For example, the members of a finance function might be invited to a presentation by an external expert in benefits realization or to a discussion on tracking project costs.

Typical types of activities that may be carried out by a community of practice include[[2]](#footnote-2):

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| *Problem solving* | "Can we work on this design and brainstorm some ideas; I’m stuck." |
| *Requests for information* | "Where can I find the code to connect to the server?" |
| *Seeking experience* | "Has anyone dealt with a customer in this situation?" |
| *Reusing assets* | "I have a proposal for a local area network I wrote for a client last year. I can send it to you and you can easily tweak it for this new client." |
| *Coordination and synergy* | "Can we combine our purchases of solvent to achieve bulk discounts?" |
| *Discussing developments* | "What do you think of the new CAD system? Does it really help?" |
| *Documentation projects* | "We have faced this problem five times now. Let us write it down once and for all." |
| *Visits* | "Can we come and see your after-school program? We need to establish one in our city." |
| *Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps* | "Who knows what, and what are we missing? What other groups should we connect with?" |

**2.2 The role of facilitator**

In addition to a shared concern or passion an effective community of practice is often distinguished by there being one or more facilitators. The facilitator considers the needs of the group and its requirements for developing capability. They ensure that the group is more than the sum of its parts. Here are some of the functions or roles the facilitator may play:

* Consider the purpose and goals of the community
* Stimulate interactions between the members and acting as a moderator and translating complex or specialist terminology to make the discussions accessible
* Establish a tone and culture
* Ensure that requests from members are met
* Monitor and evaluate patterns of activity and engagement to understand how individuals are using the community which in turn informs the type of content and discussions to develop

*What makes a good facilitator and why would anyone want to be a facilitator?*

The facilitator needs a passion for and degree of understanding for the subject matter. They need to spot opportunities and find ways to motivate others to contribute. This could be by posting a polemical, thought-provoking or topical discussion on an on-line forum. Or by encouraging a contribution from an individual whose views on a particular subject would be of value; “back-channelling” phoning or emailing someone off-line to encourage participation from selected individuals is a key approach – the “pump priming” of many successful debates.

In a face to face forum inviting the right speaker who will engage the audience and inspire and inform the discussion the community needs can be crucial. By keeping the needs of the community in mind the facilitator may be able to add considerable value with small slivers of time alongside the day job. The facilitators also need to act as a “host” modeling behaviour and setting the tone or culture of the community. In an on-line community rapid responses, even if of the “Great question, my organization is struggling with that too” variety encourage posting and an informal tone usually encourages participation.

*As a facilitator I’ve got a lot of satisfaction from supporting the development of PPM capability. I have also learnt a great deal because I keep up to date with everything that is going on and have built a really strong set of relationships – not just with my peers but with some of the leading experts in the field. It has definitely enhanced my C.V. and I’d like my next job to move my career more into the field of social media and knowledge management.* ***Community Facilitator***

The facilitator does not need to be an expert although expertise can help. Indeed, being a facilitator can give a relatively inexperienced person exposure to experts in the field. It can also give the facilitator the opportunity to build a strong network of contacts and raise their individual profile and status.

Whilst expertise is optional there is a definite benefit in having someone with excellent communication and people skills, and most importantly someone who is prepared to commit time and effort to the role as that really comes through in the vibrance of the community.

**2.3 Examples and case studies both within and across organisations**

*Case study 1: The Face to Face Community*

An organisation wanting to strengthen the delivery of projects and programmes established a post to explore whether and how this might be done. There was considerable skepticism and a lack of understanding of project and programme management. A stakeholder analysis identified key roles and individuals who needed to understand how programme and project management could help meet the challenges they were facing and play their roles effectively. These included four groups of stakeholders:

* project and programme managers and those who might take on these roles
* key support functions (such as finance, audit, procurement and HR)
* managers whose services would be involved in projects and programmes
* the executive team.

All the stakeholder groups were important. There was a need to build a shared understanding and commitment and ultimately demand for PPM showing that key individuals saw it is a something that would help them deliver their responsibilities. Quarterly meetings of all three stakeholder groups were convened. Activities included talks from experts from similar organizations who were further ahead on the journey, workshops to establish a shared understanding of issues, seminars (training) to develop a shared understanding of key project and programme management principles. Within this whole community there were targeted activities for sub-groups.

For example, an in-house accredited course in programme management was run for those who needed practitioner skills. The group of staff who completed this course built strong relationships which led to mutual peer support with embedding the best practice. They also began to develop a sense of professional identity as programme managers and became a nucleus around which best practice could develop.

Co-production of best practice: *Previous attempts to introduce best practice approaches had not gone well. Templates and guidance were cooked up corporately and then launched. But there was very little buy in and often the products simply weren’t relevant to the requirements of actually running a project or programme in an “immature” PPM environment and the culture of the organization did not support an enforced approach. Through the community approach we worked with the PMO. Actually they understood how we were working and what we were trying to do. As programme managers we agreed that we would agree a common approach to planning, reporting, risk management etcetera and the PMO acted as facilitator and developer. For the first time we have really useful tools and feel like the PMO understands how to add value.* ***Programme Manager and Community Member***

A specific presentation on benefits realisation was made to the finance community and a small group of service managers who were particularly interested or committed.

Two particularly important learning events were held for more senior staff. A two day Business Change Manager Course was held for senior managers and a session was also held for the executive team helping them to develop their understanding of their individual roles as sponsors or Senior Responsible Owners of particular initiatives and collectively their role as the sponsoring group for all the major change programmes.

The period of intensive development of the community of practice continued for around eighteen months by which time significant understanding had been achieved and the organization committed to the formation of a Programme Management Office.

Investing the time in developing capability pays off and can’t be avoided

People can’t buy in to things they don’t understand and until they have been enabled to understand in a way which fits in with their busy schedules etc.

*Case study 2: The On-line Community*

Within the public sector practitioners identified the need to network effectively to share best practice and lessons learned in embedding best practice. To complement occasional face to face meetings which are expensive in time and travel an on-line social media community of practice was established. “Volunteer” facilitators were identified from across the UK. They received a one day training course in knowledge management and through regular monthly telephone conferences planned and promoted activity on the CoP and ensured the members were welcomed and encouraged to participate.

*“When I was appointed to a new role with the task of improving programme and project management in my organisation one of the first things I did was to read the PPM CoP. It helped me to better understand what different approaches were being taken across the sector, and where the examples of best practice were.  I used the CoP to contact and meet some key individuals, who saved me a lot of time in sharing lessons learnt, and also guides which I used to develop our organisation specific approach to project management. I was so impressed from what I learnt from the CoP that I wanted to be more involved and became part of the core team and developed a PPM CoP in our organisation. Three years on this learning and sharing continues both on-line and face to face and is invauable in improving our organisations maturity in PPM”* ***Head of Portfolio Office***

Some of the key activities on the CoP include:

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| Hot seats with national experts | A chance for members of the community to ask experts their views on key topics over a four or five day period |
| Themes | A focus on particular themes of interest to members (eg benefits realization or assurance). The facilitators work to ensure a range of postings on this subject and ideally a face to face meeting to support it. |
| Article of the month | Sourced from the wider PPM world and often focus on a subjects of most concern. |
| Links to key useful web-sites and resources | A magnet feature capturing a range of key links. |
| Jobs | Another magnet feature – free advertising of PPM jobs targeted right to the sector. |
| Documents, toolkits, presentations | The intellectual capital that can save thousands of hours and millions of pounds if accessed by the right people at the right time. |
| Forums, threads and discussions | The meet and drink of the on-line community. An opportunity for members to ask their peers about the things they are working with and the issues they are struggling with. |
| Surveys and Polls  Blogs | Used to elicit understanding of views of members and as a feedback mechansim determine priority areas for the facilitators to focus activity |
| Newsletter and alerts | The key driver of activity (assuming you have contact that is of value to your members) is an effective way of summarizing activity so that the community understands what is going on and interacts with it. The community described above showed a 70% “spike” after the monthly newsletter was issued. |

*Just after taking up the role of project manager for a project that needed to be closed, a colleague recommended I look at the UK PPM Community of Practice.  This was one of the best discoveries of my career.  Suddenly I found an amazing amount of information, help and support that I'd never known was out there.  One of my key strengths is networking, so you can imagine how the community supported my preferred MO.  Following the successful closure of that project, my new task was to set up a Programme Management Office (PMO) for my employer and establish the in-house tailored approach to Prince2.  There was no way I could have done this as quickly, and with the confidence that I was using today's best practice, unless I had been part of the CoP.  The wealth of experience residing in its members is vast and the ease of posting questions, discussing topics with others, finding what you need to adapt to your own ends makes the whole concept dynamic and a truly living community.  I could not have done my job in the last 2 years without it's existence.  I'm now in the process of creating an internal community which is part of this wider one.  I hope that this will not only enable our own staff to use it as a new tool, but that they will also be able to see the breadth of knowledge in the UK that is now being successfully shared.  Now it's time for me to give something back to the community by sharing more of my own experiences and becoming one of the facilitators which will also help me develop my own skill set in yet another direction.* ***Head of Portfolio Office and Community Facilitator***

**3 Three questions to make sure your community flies**,

*Question 1* ***Who*** *Do you know who the customers are and is there a product they want?*

Are you clear who wants or need the community? Do they recognize that need? If not you will have a challenge to get things started and face to face engagement may be needed before you can consider on-line.

Remember to segment your members and approach them in different ways. They may have very different interests, needs and tolerances. Senior managers will not usually be engaged by an in-depth technical discussion, in fact this could be very counter-productive and whilst there are of course exceptions are less likely to find the time to engage on-line. Find out what people want. And best of all develop the community in collaboration with the members. This has a close relationship with stakeholder identification, analysis and engagement – especially in a CoP within a single organization. Indeed, a CoP may provide a framework and a set of opportunities or reasons for engaging with stakeholders in a postivie and productive way.

Of course, content is key If you can’t generate anything to offer people will not engage.

Think about who you let in. A closed community with members approved can promote, trust, a focused set of interest and reduce discussions that are irrelevant to many. It can also prevent the use of the community as a sales opportunity.

However, open membership can encourage all enthusiasts you didn’t know about or even expect existed to join in and create a greater diversity of views and altogether new ways of thinking about problems.

A seminal moment in the development of concept of communities of practice came from the petrol industry. It became apparent that solutions to a problem of how to drill into certain deep sea rock structures were being developed at coffee breaks where scientists from different disciplines shared expertise rather than in laboratories where they worked within the confines of one discipline. So whilst CoPs are all about engagement and involvement of the members the way you label the community and determine its parameters can define and can limit the conversations you have. Is your community a “PPM community”? A “change”, “transformation” or “innovation” community?

If the community doesn’t get going that may indicate that it is not needed or the time is not right. And many communities have a life cycle. When they have done their job it is important to recognize this and move on. Don’t flog a dead horse.

And finally, in terms of the “Who?” is whether you have active and committed facilitators as discussed above.

*Question 2* ***How?*** *Ethos and culture -Are you willing to give it all away and do people want to join in?*

Is there an ethos of sharing? Enough members of a community of practice need to put something into the pot and to share their thoughts and materials. An underlying set of attitudes, values and behaviours need to be in place. A CoP requires effort and a generous, collaborative and trusting approach. The belief that if you give away your knowledge and intellectual capital it will come back to you with interest is important but not always present or possible. If the environment is competitive or adversarial a community of practice approach will struggle. In the private sector cross-organisation communities will be more challenging if there is direct competition.

Also, ensure that participation is wanted. A compulsory community of practice would not work. Within an organization community focus on the willing enthusiasts and not the most difficult to convince. Go with the energy.

Communities of practice are all about engaging people, us. You need a welcoming, and that usually means a relatively informal, environment. One on-line community learnt that a warm, personal welcome message to new members had a huge impact on their subsequent engagement.

*Question 3* ***Why?*** *Think about the reasons why people might engage and what motivates them.*

The keen and knowledge hungry need the right content and responses. If this is provided they are likely to come. You may end up with many attenders or on-line the unkindly named “lurkers” who are listening or reading but not participating. In fact, for on-line communities only 5% of members contributing is not unusually low and apparently passive recipients may be benefit considerably and sharing what they learn from the community in other ways.

However, converting this interest into active participation does benefit everyone.

In an on-line community don’t underestimate the challenge of making the first posting. This may be a combination of not being sure about how the technology works or the unnerving experience of posting your first thoughts – especially if the community is large or the discussions are dominated by the experts (so the basic questions (which are of use to most people) can feel silly. To overcome these initial hurdles takes effort and input. You may need to find ways to show people how to use the technology and encourage people to post and reassure them that there is indeed “no such thing as a silly question”.

In a face to face community within an organization the challenge is think about the requirements of individuals and set up forums such as workshops where these can be met. Bringing staff together from different disciplines (for example, finance, procurement and PPM) or from different levels of the hierarchy in a setting where they have different sorts of conversations can be powerful in unlocking potential collaboration and illuminating divergent underlying drivers or perspectives.

The more experienced have less to benefit from receiving so it is important to think about what might motivate them to participate and engage. Never underestimate how much people enjoy helping others and sharing their knowledge. Also remember the power of recognition and acknowledgment. To be conferred expert status or a platform can be psychologically rewarding and also improve one’s marketability. It can pay dividends to invest time ensuring that individuals are recognized, thanked and rewarded.

In the context of an on-line community it is important to consider whether face to face events or contacts over the phone can be arranged. This can be used to generate connections and also content (for example posting the notes of a meeting on-line).

**4 How do individuals and organizations benefit from Communities of Practice?**

A CoP can help an organization pass a “tipping point” in terms of its understanding of PPM. By drawing key individuals into a collaborative, learning environment we can understand perspectives and foster the development of key relationships and alliances.

This may never be achieved through classroom training especially where this is focused only on those in the “doing” role of project managers and not on the key role that leaders must play as sponsors of change. A community of practice can provide a context in which formal learning is supported. A “lightbulb” moment in a project management training course can be hard to translate into reality especially in an organization where the development of PPM is at a low level of maturity.

*The organisation sent hundreds of people on project management training – both in-house introductions and more expensive accreditation courses. The courses were highly rated but we weren’t seeing a return on this investment through a strong improvement in our projects.*

*We followed up those who had been trained a few months later. We found that whilst the courses were valued, as managers and other colleagues did not understand or support a best practice approach, the initial enthusiasm of those who had been trained was quickly lost and they began to forget what they had learnt.*

*Through a CoP approach we brought some of these project managers together. They were able to support one another by sharing experiences, helping them to realize they weren’t isolated and reminding them and reinforcing what they had learnt. We also encouraged peer to peer mentoring. This has also helped us to develop recommendations and to develop the understanding and capabilities of those in managerial roles.* ***Head of a Centre of Excellence***

Communities of practice can also be much more cost-effective than training courses. If the organizing is done well there is less need for trainers as the members of the community “train” one another. Internal speakers in a community of practice context within an organization also bring a shared understanding of the organizational contex “how things really work” which a trainer cannot.

These communities can also be highly cost effective in sharing intellectual capital which may be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. Consultancies make their margins by developing intellectual capital and reselling it many times. If the members of a community can share this intellectual capital a CoP can enable significant costs to be avoided. Hundreds of thousands if not millions of pounds of intellectual property can be shared. Further value can be leveraged through collaborative action.

A capability improvement programme in local government developed a best practice PPM approach collaboratively. This would, and previously had, cost tens of thousands of pounds for an individual organization to produce. It was produced once and shared many times avoiding millions of pounds of expenditure.

Networked communities are also speedy and effective ways of spreading best practice. Are you more likely to take practice recommended by a peer who you know, respect and trust than to take the time to read glossy marketing? Viral marketing recognizes this potential to accelerate knowledge transfer through communities and connections.

As well as avoiding costs through the “re-invention” of the wheel sharing communities of practice can support the avoidance of mistakes (and the costs they create) by promoting the sharing of lessons learned and advice from peers based on experience. This is even harder to quantify but nonetheless very valuable.

Finally, communities of practice can an enjoyable as well as effective way to work. Particularly where PPM practitioners are isolated linking with peers who recognize the same issues and challenges can provide valuable support.

With thanks for contributions to Local Government Association Knowledge Management Team

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**Further reading** Source Communities of practice -a brief introduction, Etienne Wenger  
June, 2006 Self-published

For the application of a community-based approach to knowledge in organizations:

* *Cultivating communities of practice: a guide to managing knowledge.* By Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder, Harvard Business School Press, 2002.
* Communities of practice: the organizational frontier. By Etienne Wenger and William Snyder. *Harvard Business Review*. January-February 2000, pp. 139-145.
* Knowledge management is a donut: shaping your knowledge strategy with communities of practice. By Etienne Wenger. *Ivey Business Journal*, January 2004.

For technology issues:

* *Supporting communities of practice: a survey of community-oriented technologies*. By Etienne Wenger. Self-published report available at [www.ewenger.com/tech](http://www.ewenger.com/tech), 2001.

For in-depth coverage of the learning theory:

* *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity.* By Etienne Wenger, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

For a vision of where the learning theory is going:

* *Learning for a small planet: a research agenda.* By Etienne Wenger, available at [www.ewenger.com/research](http://www.ewenger.com/research), 2004.

**Communities of practice  
a brief introduction**

*Etienne Wenger  
June, 2006*

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| The term "community of practice" is of relatively recent coinage, even though the phenomenon it refers to is age-old. The concept has turned out to provide a useful perspective on knowing and learning. A growing number of people and organizations in various sectors are now focusing on communities of practice as a key to improving their performance.  This brief and general introduction examines what communities of practice are and why researchers and practitioners in so many different contexts find them useful as an approach to knowing and learning. |

**What are communities of practice?**

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell:

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| Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. |

Note that this definition allows for, but does not assume, intentionality: learning can be the reason the community comes together or an incidental outcome of member's interactions. Not everything called a community is a community of practice. A neighborhood for instance, is often called a community, but is usually not a community of practice. Three characteristics are crucial:

1. ***The domain:*** A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. (You could belong to the same network as someone and never know it.) The domain is not necessarily something recognized as "expertise" outside the community. A youth gang may have developed all sorts of ways of dealing with their domain: surviving on the street and maintaining some kind of identity they can live with. They value their collective competence and learn from each other, even though few people outside the group may value or even recognize their expertise.
2. ***The community:*** In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. A website in itself is not a community of practice. Having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together. The claims processors in a large insurance company or students in American high schools may have much in common, yet unless they interact and learn together, they do not form a community of practice. But members of a community of practice do not necessarily work together on a daily basis. The Impressionists, for instance, used to meet in cafes and studios to discuss the style of painting they were inventing together. These interactions were essential to making them a community of practice even though they often painted alone.
3. ***The practice:*** A community of practice is not merely a community of interest--people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. A good conversation with a stranger on an airplane may give you all sorts of interesting insights, but it does not in itself make for a community of practice. The development of a shared practice may be more or less self-conscious. The "windshield wipers" engineers at an auto manufacturer make a concerted effort to collect and document the tricks and lessons they have learned into a knowledge base. By contrast, nurses who meet regularly for lunch in a hospital cafeteria may not realize that their lunch discussions are one of their main sources of knowledge about how to care for patients. Still, in the course of all these conversations, they have developed a set of stories and cases that have become a shared repertoire for their practice.

It is the combination of these three elements that constitutes a community of practice. And it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community.

**What do communities of practice look like?**

Communities develop their practice through a variety of activities. The following table provides a few typical examples:

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| *Problem solving* | "Can we work on this design and brainstorm some ideas; I’m stuck." |
| *Requests for information* | "Where can I find the code to connect to the server?" |
| *Seeking experience* | "Has anyone dealt with a customer in this situation?" |
| *Reusing assets* | "I have a proposal for a local area network I wrote for a client last year. I can send it to you and you can easily tweak it for this new client." |
| *Coordination and synergy* | "Can we combine our purchases of solvent to achieve bulk discounts?" |
| *Discussing developments* | "What do you think of the new CAD system? Does it really help?" |
| *Documentation projects* | "We have faced this problem five times now. Let us write it down once and for all." |
| *Visits* | "Can we come and see your after-school program? We need to establish one in our city." |
| *Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps* | "Who knows what, and what are we missing? What other groups should we connect with?" |

Communities of practice are not called that in all organizations. They are known under various names, such as learning networks, thematic groups, or tech clubs.

While they all have the three elements of a domain, a community, and a practice, they come in a variety of forms. Some are quite small; some are very large, often with a core group and many peripheral members. Some are local and some cover the globe. Some meet mainly face-to-face, some mostly online. Some are within an organization and some include members from various organizations. Some are formally recognized, often supported with a budget; and some are completely informal and even invisible.

Communities of practice have been around for as long as human beings have learned together. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies, we all belong to communities of practice, a number of them usually. In some we are core members. In many we are merely peripheral. And we travel through numerous communities over the course of our lives.

In fact, communities of practice are everywhere. They are a familiar experience, so familiar perhaps that it often escapes our attention. Yet when it is given a name and brought into focus, it becomes a perspective that can help us understand our world better. In particular, it allows us to see past more obvious formal structures such as organizations, classrooms, or nations, and perceive the structures defined by engagement in practice and the informal learning that comes with it.

**Where does the concept come from?**

Social scientists have used versions of the concept of community of practice for a variety of analytical purposes, but the origin and primary use of the concept has been in learning theory. Anthropologist Jean Lave and I coined the term while studying apprenticeship as a learning model. People usually think of apprenticeship as a relationship between a student and a master, but studies of apprenticeship reveal a more complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place mostly with journeymen and more advanced apprentices. The term community of practice was coined to refer to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. Once the concept was articulated, we started to see these communities everywhere, even when no formal apprenticeship system existed. And of course, learning in a community of practice is not limited to novices. The practice of a community is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone.

**Where is the concept being applied?**

The concept of community of practice has found a number of practical applications in business, organizational design, government, education, professional associations, development projects, and civic life.

***Organizations.*** The concept has been adopted most readily by people in business because of the recognition that knowledge is a critical asset that needs to be managed strategically. Initial efforts at managing knowledge had focused on information systems with disappointing results. Communities of practice provided a new approach, which focused on people and on the social structures that enable them to learn with and from each other. Today, there is hardly any organization of a reasonable size that does not have some form communities-of-practice initiative. A number of characteristics explain this rush of interest in communities of practice as a vehicle for developing strategic capabilities in organizations:

* Communities of practice enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need, recognizing that, given the proper structure, they are in the best position to do this.
* Communities among practitioners create a direct link between learning and performance, because the same people participate in communities of practice and in teams and business units.
* Practitioners can address the tacit and dynamic aspects of knowledge creation and sharing, as well as the more explicit aspects.
* Communities are not limited by formal structures: they create connections among people across organizational and geographic boundaries.

From this perspective, the knowledge of an organization lives in a constellation of communities of practice each taking care of a specific aspect of the competence that the organization needs. However, the very characteristics that make communities of practice a good fit for stewarding knowledge—autonomy, practitioner-orientation, informality, crossing boundaries—are also characteristics that make them a challenge for traditional hierarchical organizations. How this challenge is going to affect these organizations remains to be seen.

***Government.*** Like businesses, government organizations face knowledge challenges of increasing complexity and scale. They have adopted communities of practice for much the same reasons, though the formality of the bureaucracy can come in the way of open knowledge sharing. Beyond internal communities, there are typical government problems such as education, health, and security that require coordination and knowledge sharing across levels of government. There also, communities of practice hold the promise of enabling connections among people across formal structures. And there also, there are substantial organizational issues to overcome.

***Education.*** Schools and districts are organizations in their own right, and they too face increasing knowledge challenges. The first applications of communities of practice have been in teacher training and in providing isolated administrators with access to colleagues. There is a wave of interest in these peer-to-peer professional-development activities. But in the education sector, learning is not only a means to an end: it is the end product. The perspective of communities of practice is therefore also relevant at this level. In business, focusing on communities of practice adds a layer of complexity to the organization, but it does not fundamentally change what the business is about. In schools, changing the learning theory is a much deeper transformation. This will inevitably take longer. The perspective of communities of practice affects educational practices along three dimensions:

* *Internally*: How to organize educational experiences that ground school learning in practice through participation in communities around subject matters?
* *Externally*: How to connect the experience of students to actual practice through peripheral forms of participation in broader communities beyond the walls of the school?
* *Over the lifetime of students*: How to serve the lifelong learning needs of students by organizing communities of practice focused on topics of continuing interest to students beyond the initial schooling period?

From this perspective, the school is not the privileged locus of learning. It is not a self-contained, closed world in which students acquire knowledge to be applied outside, but a part of a broader learning system. The class is not the primary learning event. It is life itself that is the main learning event. Schools, classrooms, and training sessions still have a role to play in this vision, but they have to be in the service of the learning that happens in the world.

***Associations***. A growing number of associations, professional and otherwise, are seeking ways to focus on learning through reflection on practice. Their members are restless and their allegiance is fragile. They need to offer high-value learning activities. The peer-to-peer learning activities typical of communities of practice offer a complementary alternative to more traditional course offerings and publications.

***Social*** ***sector***. In the civic domain, there is an emergent interest in building communities among practitioners. In the non-profit world, for instance, foundations are recognizing that philanthropy needs focus on learning systems in order to fully leverage funded projects. But practitioners are seeking peer-to-peer connections and learning opportunities with or without the support of institutions. This includes regional economic development, with intra-regional communities on various domains, as well as inter-regional learning with communities gathering practitioners from various regions.

***International development***. There is increasing recognition that the challenge of developing nations is as much a knowledge as a financial challenge. A number of people believe that a communities-of-practice approach can provide a new paradigm for development work. It emphasizes knowledge building among practitioners. Some development agencies now see their role as conveners of such communities, rather than as providers of knowledge.

***The*** ***web***. New technologies such as the Internet have extended the reach of our interactions beyond the geographical limitations of traditional communities, but the increase in flow of information does not obviate the need for community. In fact, it expands the possibilities for community and calls for new kinds of communities based on shared practice.

The concept of community of practice is influencing theory and practice in many domains. From humble beginnings in apprenticeship studies, the concept was grabbed by businesses interested in knowledge management and has progressively found its way into other sectors. It has now become the foundation of a perspective on knowing and learning that informs efforts to create learning systems in various sectors and at various levels of scale, from local communities, to single organizations, partnerships, cities, regions, and the entire world.

**Further reading**

For the application of a community-based approach to knowledge in organizations:

* *Cultivating communities of practice: a guide to managing knowledge.* By Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder, Harvard Business School Press, 2002.
* Communities of practice: the organizational frontier. By Etienne Wenger and William Snyder. *Harvard Business Review*. January-February 2000, pp. 139-145.
* Knowledge management is a donut: shaping your knowledge strategy with communities of practice. By Etienne Wenger. *Ivey Business Journal*, January 2004.

For technology issues:

* *Supporting communities of practice: a survey of community-oriented technologies*. By Etienne Wenger. Self-published report available at [www.ewenger.com/tech](http://www.ewenger.com/tech), 2001.

For in-depth coverage of the learning theory:

* *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity.* By Etienne Wenger, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

For a vision of where the learning theory is going:

* *Learning for a small planet: a research agenda.* By Etienne Wenger, available at [www.ewenger.com/research](http://www.ewenger.com/research), 2004.

1. Etienne Wenger, Introduction to Communities of Practice, 2006 self-published [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Etienne Wenger, Introduction to Communities of Practice 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)