

# Putting more practice into communities of practice

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## Abstract

The Paper is based on the evaluation of a sample of communities of practice formed with funding from Reframing the Future in 2002. The paper provides three good practice examples from the 2002 communities that were effective in identifying, reflecting upon and improving their practice, such as their ideas, tools and work styles. This reflection on practice was particularly apparent in the following ways: the participants' examination of their assessment and delivery strategies, their focus on improving their collaboration with their peers and their expressed desire to improve their negotiations with clients. The paper adds to the collective knowledge in the vocational education and training (VET) sector about the value of communities of practice for improving practice.

## Introduction

Communities of practice are groups of staff bound together by common interests and a passion for a cause, and who continually interact. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) find that all communities of practice share a basic structure: *a domain of knowledge* which creates common ground and a sense of common knowledge in the community; *a community* which creates the social fabric of learning; and *practice*, that is, a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that community members share.

The evaluation (Mitchell, 2002) of the sixteen pilot 2001 communities funded by Reframing the Future found that they were clear about their domain of knowledge and were generally effective in community building, but were less effective in exploring the depths of professional practice. Mitchell (2002) recommended that 2002 VET communities of practice may benefit from allocating sufficient human and other resources to capture better the practice that underpins their community. This paper examines the efforts to develop their practice of a sample of the 2002 VET communities.

## Literature review

A comprehensive literature review and annotated bibliography on communities of practice in relation to VET by Mitchell, Wood & Young (2001) covered many aspects of communities of practice, including definitions, characteristics, challenges, critical success factors and benefits. Mitchell, Henry & Young (2001) note that, over the last decade, one

strand of theorising linking individual adult learning to organisational learning is represented by the work of Billett (1993, 1994), Brown, Collins & Duguid (1989), Lave & Wenger (1991) and Wenger & Snyder (2000). These researchers argued that organisations, and the workplaces within them, construct contexts for individual and team learning that are socio-cultural in nature. These socio-cultural contexts for learning foster communities of practice (Wenger, 1998a, 1998b; Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Young & Mitchell, 2000).

However, in 2001 and at that stage in the development of this field, there was still scant attention paid in the literature to how communities are structured and the place of professional practice within them. In January 2002 three prominent researchers in the field of Community of Practice research, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), released *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, which sets out, more clearly than before in the literature, the internal structure of communities of practice. Wenger et al (2002) find that all communities of practice share a basic structure consisting of a unique combination of three fundamental elements – a domain of knowledge, community and practice – as follows:

1. *a domain of knowledge*, which creates common ground and a sense of common knowledge in the community. The domain inspires members to contribute and participate, guides their learning and gives meaning to their actions. Knowing the boundaries and the leading edge of the domain enables members to decide exactly what is worth sharing, how to present their ideas, and which activities to pursue.
2. *A community* creates the social fabric of learning. A strong community fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. It encourages a willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions, and listen carefully.
3. *The practice* is a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that community members share. Whereas the domain denotes the topic the community focuses on, the practice is the specific knowledge the community develops, shares and maintains. When a community has been established for some time, members expect each other to have mastered the basic knowledge of the community. (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, pp.27-29)

Wenger et al (2002) stress that it is important to develop all three elements in parallel: 'focusing too much on one while neglecting the others can be counterproductive'. (p.46). They acknowledge that developing 'domain, community, and practice together is a balancing act: each element requires a distinct kind of developmental attention and work'. (p.46) They also find that the three elements interact.

While acknowledging the interaction of the three elements, this paper focuses on the area of practice, as it was identified by Mitchell (2002) as the weakest of the three areas in the performance of the 2001 communities of practice participating in the Reframing the Future program. As Wenger et al (2002, p.46) indicate, a community can become proactive in taking charge of the development of its practice. The community can ask itself a range of questions such as:

What knowledge to share, develop, document? What kinds of learning activities to organize? How should the knowledge repository be organised to reflect the practice of members and be easily accessible? When should processes be standardized and when are differences appropriate?

Wenger et al (2002) find that these questions help a community intentionally become an effective knowledge resource both to its own members and to other constituencies that may benefit from its expertise. (p.46)

Wenger et al (2002) provide a detailed definition of practice that focuses on the communal resources that form the basis of communication within a community:

It (practice) denotes a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance and accountability. These communal resources include a variety of knowledge types: cases and stories, theories, rules, frameworks, models, principles, tools, experts, articles, lessons learned, best practices and heuristics. They include both the tacit and explicit aspects of the community's knowledge. They range from concrete objects, such as a specialized tool or a manual, to less tangible displays of competence, such as an ability to interpret a slight change in the sound of a machine as indicating a specific problem. The practice includes the books, articles, knowledge bases, web sites, and other repositories that members share. It also embodies a certain way of behaving, a perspective on problems and ideas, a thinking style, and even in many cases an ethical stance. In this sense, a practice is a sort of mini-culture that binds the community together. (pp.38-39)

This comprehensive definition and description provides a set of reference points for analyzing the development of practice within VET communities of practice.

### **Research methods**

The authors evaluated the development of the professional practice of a sample of three communities from the forty eight communities in the Reframing the Future communities of practice program in 2002. The sample of three communities was selected on the basis that the communities focused on either improving training delivery or assessment. Both foci are likely to include attention to practice, so the selected cases promise to reveal useful information about the development of practice. The three examples were also selected because of the high quality of the documentation provided by the community convenors. They were deliberately chosen as examples of good practice.

Predominantly qualitative data was collected from the communities' Action Plans, Mid-term Reports and Final Reports, as well as from workshops, site visits, participant observations and discussions. This data forms the basis for the interpretations and explanations provided in the paper.

Following Parlett & Hamilton (1975), the evaluation of the communities of practice operating in the VET sector in 2002 involved the use of participative evaluation. Participative evaluation is in contrast to the popular form of 'management' evaluation undertaken for Government-funded programs that is concerned with efficiency,

effectiveness and accountability, and which focuses on the measurement of products or outcomes, in order to provide a report for decision-makers. In the case of this program, the participative evaluation aimed primarily to illuminate the processes and settings for the participants in the projects, in order to optimise the possible benefits for the organisations undertaking the projects. Using the participative evaluation methodology, feedback was provided to project teams throughout the year, to optimise the benefits derived by the communities.

The three communities of practice examined below are:

- a community convened by the WA Arts Sport and Recreation Industry Training Council which considered issues surrounding the implementation of the Community Recreation Training Package;
- a community convened by CREATE Australia, which investigated the issues and practicalities of assessment in the arts, media and cultural industries;
- a community convened by TAFE NSW Northern Sydney Institute which examined challenges related to implementing the Business Services Training Package.

The first of these communities is interrogated in some depth and the other two more briefly.

## **Findings**

To make more tangible the concept of professional practice, the following discussion describes different elements of VET practice that can be enhanced within communities of practice. The discussion is organised around the elements identified by Wenger et al (2002) and quoted earlier.

### *Elements of practice in an arts, sport and recreation community*

Mal Gammon from the WA Arts Sports and Recreation Industry Training Council (ITC) convened a Community of Practice in 2002 to support the implementation of the Community Recreation Training Package. The community consisted of representatives from industry and from public and private registered training organizations (RTOs). The convenors found that one of the immediate benefits of the community is that it brought together a diverse range of stakeholders who shared a common aim of promoting community recreation.

The community agreed that they had a model with which to compare themselves – the aquatic industry. The previous achievements of practitioners in the WA aquatic industry in addressing training issues were used as an inspiration to the community recreation participants in the 2002 community:

The achievements of the aquatics side of community recreation have really set the standards for the potential benefits of accredited training for industry. In the case of aquatics, the peak association (LIWA Aquatics) a government body (the Health Department) registered training organisations and the ITC worked together to implement affordable training. This constituted an exemplary active core group on which to model

the development of an active core group for the 'dry' side of community recreation. The facilitator had experience and knowledge of the aquatics project so was able to bring this experience to the community of practice. (Gammon, 2002)

Wenger et al (2002) identify the consideration of a comparable model as a strategy likely to improve reflection of the community members on their current practice.

Several methodologies were used by the facilitator to create what was a requirement of the project – 'forums for thinking as well as systems for sharing information' – including the use of index cards in small group work:

In some workshops members were encouraged to discuss issues as a whole group in a relatively unstructured way, whilst in other workshops members provided their input as a 'round table' exercises and in still other workshops members broke into smaller groups. In some workshops index cards were used to represent key ideas and the cards were then used as a way of recording information. The information from the cards were transcribed into notes and distributed to the group. (Gammon, 2002)

Using the above methodology, informal and tacit knowledge of community members was made public and could be shared. Wenger et al (2002) cite such sharing of knowledge as fundamental to reflection on professional practice.

The methodology also included the development of a matrix, matching occupational titles to available training and then identified gaps:

One workshop focused entirely on identifying gaps in the training market. Participants split into groups as follows; VET, University and industry. VET representatives recorded available training while industry noted down occupational titles. The whole group reconvened and matched occupational titles to available training and then identified gaps in the matrix. This matrix was useful in terms of clearly articulating gaps in the training market and in highlighting the fact that occupational titles differ across organisations. The matrix provided a tangible focus for the community. (Gammon, 2002)

This matrix is a knowledge tool that can be used by the members of the community. Wenger et al (2002) find that the examination of practice is improved by the construction and application of such tools.

The use of experts – recommended by Wenger et al (2002) – influenced the knowledge developed by the community:

As Human Resources Manager of one of the largest Community Recreation organisation in WA, Justine Smetham was identified as a 'key thought leader'. Justine presented an overview of the way training was incorporated into that business and the importance and value of training. (Gammon, 2002)

Wenger et al (2002) note that one of the tasks of a shared practice is 'to establish a baseline of common knowledge that can be assumed on the part of each full member' (p.38). In order to provide a shared base of knowledge in the group, an A4 folder was

distributed at the first community meeting. This folder contained information pertaining to the vocational education and training system, skill recognition, a full copy of the Community Recreation Training Package qualifications framework and Training Packages in general.

The folders were then used as a repository for the growing knowledge base within the group:

Members were encouraged to add material distributed during the course of the workshops to their folders. This seemed to be an effective way of storing individuals' resources and members usually brought these folders with them to workshops to refer to and add information to. The folder can easily become a transferable resource within and across organisations and can be tailored to suit individuals' and organisations' needs by the exclusion or addition of information. It can be used as an "induction tool" for new members and a marketing tool for potential participants. (Gammon, 2002)

The active core group who participated in this project was committed to working toward a practical strategy to implement training into the community recreation sector and the facilitator ensured that this remained the case. Some of the following strategies were used to help create dialogue:

- Taking a devil's advocate point of view;
- Using knowledge of training system and examples from other areas suggesting practical strategies to 'try on';
- Encouraging members to 'listen without prejudice' to ensure that all members' view points were heard and to promote creative thinking;
- Encouraging members to apply thoughts and ideas to real scenarios. (Gammon, 2002)

As Wenger et al (2002) noted earlier, the communal knowledge resources in the Community of Practice described above provide a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance and accountability. (p.38) Placing a variety of different types of shared resources at the heart of a community – resources which can be built upon – enabled the members to refine, enrich and extend their professional knowledge and practice.

Using steps cited by Wenger et al (2002) to encourage reflection on practice, information was sourced from a range of websites, the Council's library and information systems and via other related organisation:

Where language was over technical was "translated" into 'plain' English. An email with Internet links relating to communities of practice, industry training issues and other related articles was sent out to all participants. (Gammon, 2002)

The WA Arts Sports and Recreation Community of Practice modeled a range of behaviours that meet the suggestions made by Wenger et al (2002). The following table summarises the above discussion and adds some new points, highlighting examples of many of the generic elements of practice identified by Wenger et al (2002).

**Table 1: Summary of elements of professional practice from WA Arts Sports and Recreation Community of Practice, 2002**

<b>Generic elements of professional practice (categories from Wenger et al, 2002)</b>	<b>Elements of professional practice from the WA Arts Sports and Recreation Community of Practice</b>
Sharing: cases and stories, theories, rules, frameworks, models, principles, tools, experts, articles, lessons learned, best practices and heuristics.	<p><b>Model.</b> The Aquatic field was used as an exemplary framework for this Community Recreation Group.</p> <p><b>Principle.</b> The use of training to solve common problems was the agreed, common focus in the community.</p> <p><b>Expert.</b> The HR Manager of one of the largest Community Recreation organisation in WA, was identified as a ‘key thought leader’.</p> <p><b>Tool.</b> The community developed a matrix of occupational titles and available training and the gaps.</p>
Sharing: tacit aspects of the community’s knowledge	To tap into <b>tacit knowledge</b> in the community, index cards were used in group discussion to record ideas from individuals which were then shared with the group. Additionally, an email-based game called Depolariser was used to encourage the sharing of ideas.
Sharing: explicit aspects of the community’s knowledge	To benefit from members’ <b>explicit knowledge</b> , participants were asked to prepare to discuss pre-set topics at workshops.
Sharing: concrete objects, such as a specialized tool or a manual	<p>To ensure some knowledge was <b>concrete</b>, a folder of information containing information about Training Packages was tabled at the start of the community’s life. The folder was added to by the participants during the community’s development.</p> <p>A matrix was developed, mapping occupational titles to available training.</p>
Sharing: less tangible competencies of the members	The facilitator used a range of strategies to identify <b>less tangible</b> competencies of the community’s members, such as encouraging members to apply thoughts and ideas to real scenarios.
Sharing: books, articles, knowledge bases, web sites, and other repositories	<p>Information was <b>sourced</b> from a range of websites, the Council’s library and information systems.</p> <p>An email with Internet links relating to communities of practice, industry training issues and other related articles was sent out to all participants.</p>

The description of the progress of the WA Recreation and Sport Community of Practice matches the pattern predicted by Wenger et al (2002):

An effective practice evolves with the community as a collective product. It is integrated in people’s work. It organises knowledge in a way that is especially useful to practitioners because it reflects their perspective. Each community has a specific way of

making its practice visible through the ways that it develops and shares knowledge.  
(p.39)

The WA community certainly developed its own way of organising and sharing and constructing knowledge that suited its members.

### *Elements of practice in a creative arts community*

The following brief discussion describes elements of practice that were the focus of two other communities of practice that participated in the 2002 Reframing the Future program, illustrating ways of stimulating reflection on practice in other settings.

CREATE, the national industry training advisory board for the arts, media and cultural industries, in partnership with its State counterparts, key sector enterprises and Registered Training Organisations, developed a Community of Practice to investigate the issues surrounding assessment in the arts, media and cultural industries. The community focused specifically on the issue of assessing creativity. A national workshop was a key activity for the community, raising many valuable ideas, but the ongoing challenge is to maintain a community in which the members are located around Australia. Convenor Marie Manidis considers that concrete results from the community's interactions were the understanding that assessment involves working with industry, the acceptance that there is a mix of subjective and objective factors in assessment, and the commitment to making assessment criteria more explicit.

The CREATE Community of Practice stimulated reflection on practice in a variety of ways. For instance, at the national workshop, presentations or demonstrations were provided by a range of artists and practitioners from the areas of visual art, painting, film, multimedia, dance, music and acting. Participants at the workshop were then led through a process of recording their assessment of the arts practice and attempting to articulate the language used to describe creativity and competence in the cultural industries. Marie Manidis (2002) reports that the interest and dialogue this created was a highlight and featured highly in the participant's evaluation of the workshop.

Other strategies identified by community members, following the national workshop, that could improve their reflection on practice included:

- exchanging of anecdotal comments about the experiences of becoming an RTO;
- ongoing discussion about common ideas and issues;
- development of an assessor network, operating both online and face-to-face;
- use of an email distribution list provided to all;
- development of a database from the distribution which lists expertise so that people can make appropriate contacts as needed;
- an email discussion group, or on-line forum. Potential focus areas could be looking more closely at the creative process, having the innovation kit used in the arts;
- subgroup meetings on various topics of interest, working as 'mini' communities of practice;
- access to an online 'chat room';

- follow-up (e.g. quarterly) meetings to continue to discuss and debate creativity;
- development of assessment tools for clusters of units that involve the assessment of creativity (e.g. performance criteria, skills and knowledge). (Manidis, 2002)

### *Elements of practice in a business services community*

Understanding and implementing a Training Package is a common concern of VET professionals and is a likely focus of a Community of Practice. A Community of Practice convened by TAFE NSW Northern Sydney Institute established networks between part-time casual teachers, teachers and head teachers from, other Metropolitan Institutes, industry and Educational Divisions, to assist in the resolution of issues that arose with the implementation of the new Business Services Training Package, particularly issues related to assessment. The community established agreements regarding delivery and assessment in relation to workplace delivery and examined the recognition process and the guidelines for supporting students.

With the assistance of facilitator Margaret Dix, sample activities undertaken by the Community of Practice to encourage reflection on practice, included:

- the deliberate construction of professional conversations around assessment validation;
- recording of tips the participants would suggest for other teachers implementing evidence-based assessment in a Training Package environment;
- the extensive use of email to exchange ideas, keep track of proceedings and distribute the deliverables;
- developing a bank of 39 assessment tools that have been validated;
- creation of a validation process that is user-friendly and that all TAFE teachers can use. (from Dix, 2002)

### **Discussion**

The above three exemplars of communities of practice were effective in identifying, reflecting upon and improving their practice, such as their ideas, tools and work styles. This reflection on practice was particularly apparent in the following ways: the participants' examination of their assessment and delivery strategies, their focus on improving their collaboration with their peers and their expressed desire to improve their negotiations with clients.

This paper highlighted the elements of practice within a sample of three communities of practice funded by Reframing the Future in 2002. The paper pointed to the tacit and explicit resources in each community and different ways that knowledge can be shared, such as by using experts or theories or tools. The study shows that future communities of practice in VET could usefully adopt the language of Wenger et al (2002) such as 'communal knowledge resources' in order to deliberately seek out and access the knowledge and competencies of community members.

This report shows that communities of practice are being embraced by VET providers as they provide a means to increase social capital: they are a means for practitioners to extend and cultivate their relationships with peers, industry and other stakeholders in VET. The profiles in this report demonstrate a new-found appreciation in VET that the social capital in an organisation is the product of practitioners' relationships. (Lessor, 2000) Communities of practice enable practitioners to create, share and apply their knowledge with other practitioners and with their clients.

Creating, accessing, storing and reformulating knowledge is a key to organisational competitiveness. However, communities of practice do not merely manage knowledge assets: they create value in many different ways. (Wenger et al, 2002, p.15). This creation of value deserves ongoing systemic and organisational support.

Skills are needed to extract and build upon the knowledge and competencies of community members. Wenger et al (2002) suggest that one high-level skill is to know how to balance the development of documents and tools with the need for ongoing interaction. Wenger et al (2002) are clear that a community must have 'a shared understanding' of what aspects of its domain are codifiable and which are not and what to do in each case:

Successful practice development depends on a balance between joint activities, in which members explore ideas together and the production of 'things' like documents or tools. It involves an ongoing interplay of codification and interactions, of the explicit and the tacit. (p.39)

As communities of practice are an essential aspect of knowledge management, Wenger, et al (2002, p.12) argue that organisations need to cultivate communities of practice actively and systematically, for the benefit of organisations as well as for the benefit of the members and the communities themselves. They suggest that:

organisations can do a lot to create an environment in which they (communities) can prosper: valuing the learning they do, making time and other resources available for their work, encouraging participation, and removing barriers. (Wenger et al, 2002, p.13)

There are significant management implications of the findings from this research into the value of communities of practice for VET. It is important that VET managers acknowledge the value of communities of practice, and actively stimulate and support them, particularly if they wish to see the implementation of the national training system benefit from the improved professional relationships and shared understandings between the VET and industry personnel who participate in the communities.

The paper provides examples of practice being addressed within good practice exemplars of VET communities of practice, but the study emphasises the ongoing need for communities of VET practitioners to better understand their practice. The paper is a call to practitioners to strongly locate the investigation of practice – including the knowledge, documents and tools the community develops – at the heart of their communities of practice: to continue to focus on their practice within their communities of practice.

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