

Action Research Plan

## Communities of Practice

Our current model of education has been founded on the assumption that learning is an individual process with a beginning and an end. Current practices separate learning from the rest of our activities. Competition is prevalent in many classrooms and the transmission of knowledge from teacher to learner is seen as the most efficient method to educate our youth (Wenger et al, 2002). While this method served an industrial society, it cannot sustain a society where rapid change and knowledge acquisition occur so quickly that individual mastery is almost impossible. As today's companies and organizations expand and enlarge, it may no longer be possible to buy a colleague a cup of coffee to learn the things you need to know (Powers, 2004). In today's society, collective knowledge will be needed to complement and develop expertise. To be effective people must work collectively as a community. Combining the needs of organizations and members is crucial in a knowledge economy, where companies succeed by fully engaging the creativity of their employees (Wenger et al, 2002).

As educators examine current learning theories, cultural values, and beliefs, they are discovering that the current educational system will no longer be able to address the needs of students entering the workforce of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Learning is a fundamentally social activity—whether in schools, workplaces, or other environments. It is going on all the time, often through the informal interactions we have with different people everyday (Graham 1998). In this light, a new model of learning has emerged that promises to leverage knowledge sharing, learning, and change--Community of Practice (Wenger, 2000).

By creating small learning units within schools, leaders can support teacher professional development that promises to produce a transformational effect on student achievement (Bloom, 2004). As noted by Bloom, the idea of smaller learning units within larger learning communities is not new. The smaller units create an culture of closeness and personal connections, both of which are conducive for growth and risk-taking. Communities of practice consist of members who share concerns, problems or passion for a common topic. Additionally they share a desire to deepen their knowledge through continued interaction over time. (Wenger et al, 2002). Communities of

practice provide one model for creating the smaller learning units that Bloom suggests help to provide support for professional development among teachers. Through a community of practice, learners are situated within a context of practice. They have an opportunity to practice authentic tasks, resulting in problem resolution and learning (Dunlap, 2004).

We know more than we can tell. The tacit aspects of knowledge are often the most valuable. This tacit knowledge consists of a deep understanding of complex, interdependent systems that enables dynamic responses to context specific problems. Knowledge of this type is difficult to replicate. A Community of Practice provides opportunities for interaction and learning processes that tacit knowledge requires. Their dynamic, informal or formal nature places them in the best position to combine useful documentation, tools, and procedures along with tacit knowledge such as storytelling, coaching, and apprenticeship. These artifacts are more meaningful because they are not objects, rather they are a part of the community (Wenger et al, 2002). Community of Practice evolve into resources where members can get immediate help with problems, can create better solutions and make better decisions, and keep current in their field. Members are willing to take risks and “think outside the box” because they have the support of the community. Perhaps most importantly, they accumulate their experience in a knowledge base, and the intangible value of increased ability to innovate (Wenger et al, 2002). Communities of Practice connect the personal development and professional identities of members to the strategy of the organization.

Cultivating a Community of Practice is a difficult task. They cannot be mandated or created, but they can be coordinated, facilitated, and cultivated (Wenger et al, 2002). A Community of Practice cannot be managed as it takes on a life of its own—a living organism so to speak. Many examples of Communities illustrate that a Community of Practice frequently defies management. The difficulty of managing knowledge is that it is not an object. As Wenger noted, it cannot be owned or moved like an object. It resides in the individuals and their relationships as well as in the artifacts. A key to designing a Community of Practice is to bring the right people together, provide an infrastructure in which they can thrive, measure the communities’ value in non-traditional ways, and encourage the development of social fabric within the members (Wenger, 2000). Learning will happen whether it is designed for or not. The key task is to design a

social infrastructure to foster learning. Sustaining a Community of Practice and integrating it into organizations is not easy. Wenger suggests that a Community of Practice is similar to living organisms and as such are resistant to interference.

Before attempting to cultivate a Community of Practice, Wenger suggests an examination of goals. What do you hope to accomplish? Are you trying to build relationships among people and practice? Are you interested in connecting people with common interests? He points to the importance of understanding the goals (Wenger 2002). Much of the research suggests that members may be either self-selected or assigned, however participation is voluntary. Individual members determine their own level of engagement. Wenger noted that people often need prodding to discover the value of learning in a community. Becoming familiar with the three levels of participation that Wenger noted are evident in any Community of Practice can assist in the process of cultivation of the community and provide the necessary diversity needed for a wide diversity of members.

There are three levels of participation evident in a Community of Practice: the core group, the active group, and the peripheral group. Each fulfills an important role:

- The core group is small and active in the community.
- The active group attends the meetings, but only occasionally participates in discussions
- The peripheral group does not necessarily participate directly, instead preferring to watch for a distance. Peripheral groups do benefit from the community as they learn from observing, listening, and watching the active and core groups.

It is important to provide for all three levels of participation within a Community of Practice. As noted earlier, cultivating a Community of Practice is not an easy task, therefore, making opportunities for semiprivate interaction, whether through private discussion rooms on the web site, etc is an important key for cultivating. In this way, you can provide for varying participation levels (Wenger et al, 2002).

If cultivating a community of practice is such a challenge, how does one accomplish such a task? One such element necessary in the cultivation of a community of practice is the role of a coordinator(s). Coordinators help to cultivate a community of practice when they organize events and connect community members. They discover who talks to whom about what topics, issues of importance, obstacles and barriers. One method of discovering this information is through informal network analysis. A key role for the coordinator is to help the

community focus on its domain, maintain relationships through networking, and develop its practice (Wenger et al, 2002). However, even the best coordinator(s) still needs to provide a reason for members to stay engaged in the community. Staying focused on the reasons why the community has been created will help the coordinator(s) provide value to the members.

By focusing on current problems and issues of members, a Community of Practice can provide early value. It is important to allow value to emerge through the events, activities and relationships that develop. Coordinators should strive to keep events both familiar and exciting. This duality creates a tension that keeps the community interesting (Barab, 2003). "A combination of whole-group and small-group gatherings creates a balance between the thrill of exposure to many different ideas and the development of more intimate relationships." A mix of idea-sharing discussions and forums and tool building projects fosters both causal connections (Wenger et al, 2002). Through this focus on value and relationships, communities of practice can provide the frame for both the development of new and continued professional development opportunities. As a professional development venue, the Community of Practice can provide members with the opportunity to put knowledge into practice through engagement within a community of practitioners. Viewing professional development and Community of Practices as socio-organizational system requires communication and close cooperation among members (Schlager, 2003).

The design of a Community of Practice should be such that the community's own internal direction, character, and energy can be realized. Design for evolution, diversity, value, public and private interaction, familiarity, excitement, and rhythm. The heart of the community is the relationships among members. Work the informal "back channels" by encouraging communication among members between meetings (Wenger et al, 2002). Remember that cultivation is more about eliciting and fostering participation than planning, directing, and organizing their activities. The process has to be one of negotiation. You cannot act unilaterally. Your power is always mediated by the community's own pursuit of its interests (Wenger et al, 2002). With this in mind, it makes sense to cultivate your community of practice around domains rather than tools. It is the domain that will matter and that will attract members (Kling, 2003). In the way, technology needs to be structured technically, socially, and sociotechnically. This approach will provide necessary interactions and social behavior in an integrative manner (Kling, 2003). A Community

of Practice, just as in any groups, will produce its own norms, purpose, accessibility, and expectations.

All Communities of Practice share the same basic structure: “ a domain of knowledge which defines a set of issues, a community of people who care about the domain, shared practice that they are developing.” (Wenger et al, 2002):

- The domain provides common ground and common identity.
- Community fosters interaction and relationships based on respect and trust. Practice consists of the frameworks, ideas, tools, stories, and documents that are shared.

When all elements function, the Community of Practice becomes an ideal knowledge structure—“a social structure that can assume responsibility for developing and sharing knowledge.” (Wenger et al, 2002).

Each of the three elements of a Community of Practice are equally important. The work of identifying a shared domain is critical to development. Important questions in this area are “What topics and issues do we really care about? How is this domain connected to the organization’s strategy?” (Wenger et al, 2002). The community itself will need attention, organization and nurturing. Important questions in this are: “What roles are people going to play? How often will the community meet? How will members connect on an ongoing basis? “This attention enables the community to grow (Wenger et al, 2002). Finally, the practice consists of identifying “What knowledge to share, to develop, and to document? What kinds of learning activities to organize? How should the knowledge repository be organized to reflect the practice of members?” (Wenger et al, 2002).

Developing all three elements is a balancing act. Each element requires specific development attention and work. However, all three interact and it is that interaction that makes a healthy, vibrant community. The elements are dynamic and in a constant state of evolution. While dynamic, it is important that all three are not in flux at the same time as this will put the community at risk. One strategy for development community is to use the synergy between domain, community, and practice to help a community evolve and fulfill its potential (Wenger et al, 2002).

The Web Resource Collaboration Center, a tool designed to let users collaborate and design their own resources, developed three functional areas for community use: The Discussion Forum, the Link Manager, and the Resource Construction System. The impact of this design is in

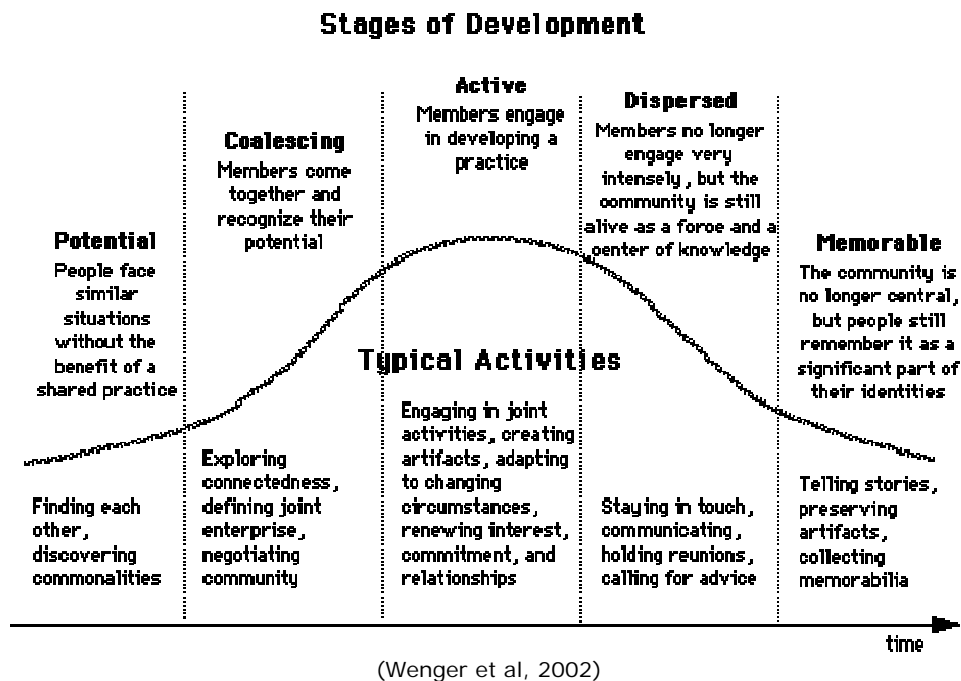
the purposeful use and integration of these tools (Dunlap, 2004). Each tool assists in creating synergy between the elements. Discussion forums provide a means by which learners encounter a variety of ideas, solutions and perspective through collaborative interaction. In order to contribute to the communities of practice, learners must express and elaborate their own understanding (Dunlap, 2004). Learners ask questions based on their own goals and needs. They reflect on what they do know or don't know. The discussion forum provides a way to capture the "here's what I did" (Dunlap, 2004). The Link Manager allows learners to build the community resources collaboratively. They collect and annotate resources based on their needs. In this sense, the building of knowledge is a collaborative process. Learners add to the link manager, they decide what is included or excluded from the resource. In this way, learners reflect on the usefulness of the resources (Dunlap, 2004). The Resource Construction Center provides an opportunity for learners to work together to build new, unique resources. These resources are based on the needs of the learners. Combining the technology of document sharing and asynchronous threaded communication to create an environment in which learners collaboratively develop resources (Dunlap, 2004). The combination of these tools provides participations with a variety of methods for participating in the community.

In providing for varying levels of participation, chat technologies must be considered. Chat opportunities are important in fostering both event-oriented exchanges and impromptu exchanges in which members can connect with one another. Chats function as the virtual counterpart of traditional structures such as offices, conference rooms, etc. Chats facilitate the holding of office hours, question and answer sessions, group discussions, etc (Adams, 2003). User profile pages provide the opportunity for members to share information about their interests, education, skills, etc. Additionally, they can help members by providing the ability to preview a member's background and experience with various topics, they can help members to locate specific expertise in the community, and they can assist in the negotiation of meaning by providing credentials, experience, and background on individual members (Adams, 2003).

When cultivating a Community of Practice, it is important to know and prepare for the transitional stages that occur throughout cultivation. Communities of Practice continually evolve through five developmental stages: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation. While starting as an informal loose network, they hold the potential of becoming more connected. It is the connections

themselves that assist the informal network in coalescing into a community of practice. As they evolve through these stages, the activities needed to develop them also change. A coordinator cultivates the community through discovering who talks to whom about what topics, the strength of various relationships, and obstacles that might impede knowledge sharing and collaboration. The coordinator helps the community to focus on its domain, its relationships and its practice (Wenger et al, 2002).

## Community of Practice – Stages of Development



### Potential Stage

The first stage, potential stage, begins with the informal loose network. Often people begin networking around an important topic. These are the people most likely to form the core group of the community. Important activities at this stage include providing various means for the community to connect with each other. As a sense of shared domain develops, the need for more systematic interactions emerges and generates interest. Each element has several issues to consider at this stage: define the scope of the domain, find people who already network on topics, and identify the common knowledge needs of the potential community (Wenger et al, 2002).

**Coalescing Stage** The second stage, Coalescing begins when the community is officially launched through various events, and community building activities. It is critical to initiate activities that encourage relationship building, trust and common interests and needs. The key issues for each element in this stage: establishing the value of sharing knowledge, developing relationships and trust to discuss “sticky” practice problems, discovering what knowledge should be share and how this should be accomplished (Wenger et al, 2002).

### **Maturing Stage**

The third stage, maturing, occurs when the emphasis shifts from establishing value to clarifying the focus, role and boundaries of the community. While physical growth is a challenge at this time, a shift from sharing tips to developing a comprehensive body of knowledge expands demands on community members. The key issues for each element in this stage: defining the community's role in the organization, managing the boundaries of the community which has expanded beyond a network of professional friends, organizing the knowledge of the community and taking the stewardship seriously (Wenger et al, 2002).

### **Stewardship Stage**

The fourth stage, stewardship, occurs through sustaining momentum through the natural shifts in practice, members, technology, and relationship to the organization. Key issues for each element in this stage: maintaining relevance and finding voice in the organization, keeping the tone and intellectual focus lively and engaging, keeping the community on the cutting edge (Wenger et al, 2002).

### **Transformation Stage**

Stage five, transformation, is defined as the tension between the sense of ownership and the community's openness to new ideas. This tension is never fully resolved. As a community expands, it also risks diluting its focus. When a community closes its boundaries, it risks suffocating itself (Wenger et al, 2002).

As I have noted in this review, communities of practice can produce excellent outcomes for their organizations, but they also can produce negative outcomes as well. Several challenges include the reluctance of teachers to engage in inquiry or dialogue that critiques their own practice or that of their peers. Research has cited the importance and

difficulty of building trusting and respectful relationships across school departments (Schlager, 2003). Craft intimacy can create barriers that prevent newcomers from becoming accepted. In this sense, the community can become an ideal structure for avoiding learning. Pride of ownership, too much community, and the complexity of interrelationships can undermine the positive aspects of communities. It is important to continually reflect on the community's functioning and be watchful for these developments (Wenger et al, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

To be added here