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Professional Book Review
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Quotable Quote.....

“We share a vision that communities of practice will help shape society with pervasive knowledge-oriented structures. They will provide new points of stability in an increasingly mobile, global, and changing world”

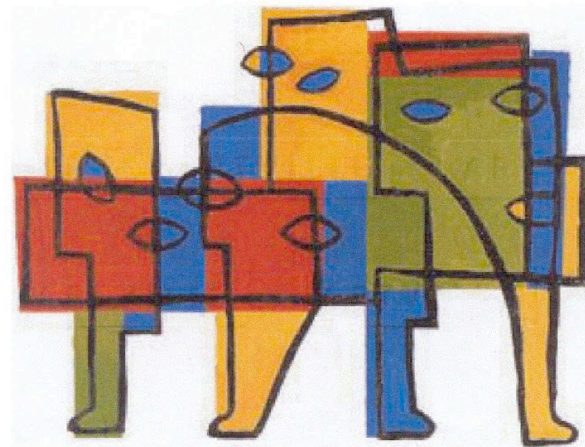
(Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder 2002: xii)

Read on for a human resources in education perspective on this foundational piece.

A GUIDE TO MANAGING KNOWLEDGE

CULTIVATING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

ETIENNE WENGER
RICHARD McDERMOTT
WILLIAM SNYDER



HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PRESS

Reference

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Harvard Business School Press

Introduction

Cultivating Communities of Practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) is a foundational piece for many of the structures and strategies used by contemporary organizations. The following review will take place from a human resources in education perspective, with particular attention to how the ideas and concepts within are reflected in today's use of professional learning communities (PLCs) as knowledge sharing bodies within schools and school divisions.

This review will begin with a brief introductory précis and outline of how the book was structured. Following this a chapter-by-chapter overview will introduce the most salient ideas and advice from the authors for how to optimize their use and implementation.

Once the content of the book has been sufficiently shared the next step will be to take a more critical viewpoint, including some suggestions for further investigations for researchers in the field. This is followed up with a description of how contemporary PLCs exhibit many of the ideas put forth by the authors of *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, as well as how pieces of the book may enhance them further. Lastly, questions for further discussion will be suggested.

First Look: A Précis

Cultivating Communities of Practice is a groundbreaking book for the planning, implementation, maintenance, and optimization of learning communities in today's organizations.

The authors began by introducing the concept of a community of practice as a group of people within an organization, profession, or with some other professional connection who regularly meet to share knowledge, problem solve, and study issues pertinent to them. To the authors, this community is a resource, support network, and safe place to let one's guard down.

The book then went on to outline the components of, and how to create and optimize a community of practice. This included early steps all the way through maturation and even "death". Added to this was direction for how to measure the value being gleaned from the community so as to justify it, recognize member contributions, and target future areas of work. Also included was a description of the common problems found in, and even caused by, some communities- and how best to deal with them.

Lastly, the book closed with a call for communities of practice to extend far beyond the walls of any one organization, extending their value to the public sphere and even global context.

Structure of the Book

Cultivating Communities of Practice is broken down into ten chapters, each building on the previous to form a comprehensive knowledge base for the reader.

In chapters one through five the authors define the concept of a community of practice and their value. Beginning with the broad, they narrowed the focus to describe the structural components of a community of practice, principles for building them, and the initial steps in their construction. This was furthered with a description of how communities of practice can grow and be sustained over time.

Chapters six and seven were devoted to dealing with both the challenges posed by varying diversity of community, as well as addressing the potential downsides of communities of practice and ideas for how to ameliorate some of them. A logical follow-up to this was Chapter eight which provided strategies for monitoring and managing the effectiveness of the communities.

Chapter nine looked at the broader context and how communities of practice may be an asset not only to their membership but also other members of the organization or even other neighboring organizations. Finally, chapter ten took things a step further to the global context. In this the authors posited that a reframing of the world could take place in which knowledge communities became the basic organizational unit, allowing the benefits to flow throughout society and societies.

Chapter 1

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND THEIR VALUE TO ORGANIZATIONS

“COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE are groups of people who share a concept, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4).

The above definition provided by the authors is a good starting point to this chapter which outlined just what was meant by the term, where they are found in the past and present, and their value to all types of organizations.

The chapter began with a case study of Chrysler where, during the late 1980s, there was a real danger of business failure due to Japanese competition. They described how at that time functional units ie. design, engineering, manufacturing, sales etc worked in disconnected departments and the resulting lack of efficiency brought on by repeated hand-offs, duplication, and lack of interaction between them. They then described how an early form of knowledge community was formed, being called “Tech Clubs” wherein knowledge was shared and recorded for the benefit of the entire organization with corresponding gains in efficiency and product innovation (pp. 1-4).

They then went on to further discuss the history of this type of behaviour, tracing it as far back as ancient Rome and the middle ages where trades people and artisans formed collaborative groupings or guilds where knowledge was shared. This history was followed up to the present day where the authors suggested that we all belong to multiple communities of practice, largely invisible, whether we realize it or no. (pp.5).

Most of the remaining chapter was devoted to sharing the authors’ understanding of the value of communities of practice with the reader. This value was comprised of the short and long term, as well as tangible and intangible varieties. These are further unpacked in the frame diagram below.

<p>Short Term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -help with immediate problems -less time looking for answers/information -better decision-making 	<p>Tangible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -actual measurable gain i.e. better student test scores, cost savings, a manual or set of best procedures
<p>Long Term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -more confidence in risk taking -ongoing best practice development (accumulating knowledge base) 	<p>Intangible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -relationship building/sense of belonging -increased trust -ability to innovate/spirit of inquiry

(pp. 14-16)

Chapter 2 begins with a description of the diversity of forms that communities of practice can take, from small to big, long term to short lived, collocated to distributed, homogeneous to heterogeneous, within or across organizations, spontaneous or intentional, and unrecognized to fully institutionalized (pp. 24-27).

The authors then stipulated that a community of practice, regardless of form, will share three structural elements which are described briefly in the diagram below. They also provided case examples for each which aided understanding.

Domain	Community	Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The common ground or purpose of the community. -Defined issues of the group -Boundaries enable the members to decide what is worth sharing, how to share their ideas, and what activities to pursue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The people who are invested in the domain -Can include very diverse groupings. -Groups can be of many sizes and depend on various types of internal leadership as well as formalized and/or informal roles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -That which they are developing to be more effective in their domain. -Baseline of common knowledge is established -New innovations, techniques etc are developed and shared through collaboration of members.

(pp. 27-38)

Chapter 2

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND THEIR STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

This is a key chapter in which the authors established seven principles for the cultivation of communities of practice. Each is described in brief below.

Chapter 3

SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR CULTIVATING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

1) Design for Evolution (pp. 51-53)	-Communities are made from existing networks and evolve with the addition of new members, demands, or organizational directions -Key is to help the community to grow rather than impose a structure.
2) Open a Dialogue Between Inside and Outside Perspectives (pp. 54-55)	-Effective community design is constructed from the collective experience of the members. -Outside knowledge as important source, particularly that about more developed networks (to enhance community efficacy). -Communication with other communities as crucial for positive evolution.
3) Invite Different Levels of Participation (pp. 55-58)	-Different people as having different interest levels in the community and therefore should be expected to have differing levels of contribution as opposed to expecting equal participation. -Core group, Active and Peripheral members, as well as outsiders all will and should contribute at different levels based on their status at the time.
4) Develop Both Public and Private Community Spaces (pp. 58-59)	-Public spaces as those which are official, open to all community members, and include planned discussions of current issues etc. -Private spaces as the more "back channel", informal discussions between members- both in support of public meetings and individuals.
5) Focus on Value	"Rather than attempting to determine their expected value in advance, communities need to create events, activities, and relationships that help their potential value emerge and discover new ways to harvest it" (p. 60).
6) Combine Familiarity and Excitement (pp. 61-62)	-Communities as neutral, safe places to exchange ideas and have candid discussions in comfort..But also, vibrant communities need a supply of divergent thinking and activity in order to challenge group members and taken for granted thinking.
7) Create a Rhythm for the Community (pp. 62-63)	-Tempo of group interactions is influenced heavily by the rhythm of community events. A strong and rhythmic beat creates a sense of movement and liveliness without becoming too overwhelming.

Chapter 4 is devoted to outlining what the authors held as the two early stages of development of a learning community.

These included the following;

POTENTIAL

- This requires an existing group who may come together in a community, provided that they are able to define a domain, build their membership to sufficient levels, and identify common practice needs.
- The authors provided advice as to how to do these things, beginning with determining the primary intent of the community- whether helping others, developing best practice, or knowledge stewardship, as well as identifying the engaging issues . The next task the authors detailed was how to identify potential coordinators and thought leaders as a foundation, then expanding out to interview potential members and include new members in an initial design.
(pp. 70-82)



COALESCING

- In this next step the community is officially launched through holding events and the provision of activities which build relationships and trust, and an awareness of their common needs and interests.
- The authors wrote that regular events act as anchors for the community, being held in what will become a familiar space and facilitating the relationship building- especially among core members. Documentation burdens were advised to be light at this stage and a concentration on early value building, in part to legitimize the community was also advocated.
(pp. 82-90)

Chapter 4

THE EARLY STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Following the two early stages, in Chapter 5 the authors then addressed what they posited were the next stages of development of a maturing community of practice.

They included the following.

POTENTIAL 

COALESCING 

MATURING

- The authors stated that in this phase the main issue has become the clarification of the communities focus, role, and boundaries to ensure that the group is not diverted from its core purpose.
- This, the authors suggested, was also the time to expand the membership so as to multiply the relationship potential and add more excitement to the community, balancing this with the risk of diluting the focus and the corresponding losses of intimacy/trust that new members result in.
- Lastly, the authors also advised other items for the agenda including identifying knowledge gaps, defining the community's role in the organization, and continuing to redefine the focus. (pp. 97-104)



STEWARDSHIP

"The main issue for a mature community is how to sustain its momentum through the natural shifts in its practice, members, technology, and relationship to the organization" (p. 104).

The authors detailed several activities that should take place in order to tend to the community during this time. These included; institutionalizing the voice of the community within the organization, rejuvenating the community through new members, topics, or meeting with other groups, recruiting new people into the core group, developing new leadership, and seeking new relationships outside of the organization (pp. 104-108)



TRANSFORMATION

-The authors reasoned that at times a community will change radically or even cease to exist due to many different possible causes. They contended that this is natural and to be expected, however also warned that some die before their time due to negligence- and pointed out that this possibility can provide motivation to enliven the community . (pp. 109-111)

Chapter 5

THE MATURE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Chapter 6 was devoted to unpacking and offering remedies for the challenges of distributed communities- those that cannot often meet face-to-face due to various factors such as geography, size of the community, trans-organizational affiliation, and cultural differences (pp. 115-116).

Each of the factors noted above were shown by the authors to possibly negate the effectiveness of the community, with multiple factors compounding the negative effect. However, the authors also suggested several strategies for dealing with distributed communities, these included the following;

- Reconciling multiple agendas and establishing craft intimacy (commonality of problem or practice that can be focussed on)
- Trust and relationship building
- A strong enough rhythm to keep the community visible i.e. teleconferences, online threads, periodic face-to-face meetings
- Actively develop the private space of the community i.e. well run website with biographical details on members, clusters within the community, visits to other sites

(pp. 120-134)

Chapter 6

THE CHALLENGE OF DISTRIBUTED COMMUNITIES

Chapter 7

THE DOWNSIDE OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In Chapter 7 the authors further investigated the challenges to communities of practice and their potential downsides. They also provided helpful advice as to how to avoid or ameliorate the effect of these problems.

The downsides were broken into three main types, *domain*, *community*, and *practice*. Example disorders from each, along with suggested remedies, are included within the chart below.

	Disorder	Remedy
Domain	IMPERIALISM- too strong a sense of ownership over their area of knowledge or its importance.	Exposure to other perspectives in the context of challenges that require the combination of multiple approaches
	MARGINALITY- not being taken seriously by the organization, becoming a “gripe” community without influence.	Bringing the community into the organizational fold and giving them visible responsibility to make their contributions positive and effective.
Community	CLIQUEES- relationships between members dominating other concerns, gatekeepers to the core group.	New blood- people who have not been caught up in the internal relationships who can help to refocus and prioritize without social fears.
	DEPENDENCE- too much need placed on one leader. This results in vulnerability due to potential departure and/or silences other voices	Spread out the leadership and share responsibilities throughout the community.
Practice	DOCUMENTISM- documenting carried to the extreme that it is seen as a purpose unto itself, creation of an “information junkyard” and time/resource wastage	Identify truly important documents and clear rules for managing them.
	DOGMATISM- unbending commitment to established rules/methods, resulting in unwillingness to accept new ideas etc.	Often due to blind respect for authority, thought leaders needed to guide the community to more flexibility/adaptability.

(pp. 142-149)

In Chapter 8 the focus was on measuring the value created by communities of practice, this legitimizing their role in the organization and providing a basis for prioritizing their activities. This was noted as being delicate by the authors as there is a risk of distortions of behaviour/data (pp. 167)

The authors stipulated that data should be gathered systematically, either from the bottom up or top down depending on the purpose of data collection. They provided four broad steps in the measurement process.

1. Determining for whom the measurement is for and for what purpose.
2. Selecting what type of data to collect and how
3. Raising awareness about the measurement- particularly when gathering causal stories etc that require input from others in and outside the group
4. Deciding when and where to measure
5. Combining the data into an overall picture that summarizes the contribution of the community

(pp. 172-176)

Managing the performance was suggested to be devoted to “appraising the performance of the community and for addressing gaps or providing recognition for achievements” (p. 181).

Chapter 8

MEASURING AND MANAGING VALUE CREATION

Chapter

9

COMMUNITY-BASED KNOWLEDGE INITIATIVES

Chapter 9 returned to the subject of creating knowledge communities, this time with particular attention to doing so within an organization so as to optimize their performance through making use of the resources and power that can be harnessed (pp.190-191)

Several design principles were provided, these included the following;

Evolutionary design- “design a little, implement a lot” (p. 192) and allow it to develop naturally without attempting to over-orchestrate the process.

Distributed leadership- informal and formal leaders, both inside and outside of the community should share responsibilities.

Participation across multiple structures- include a range of perspectives and participants from various roles throughout the organization.

Dance of formal and informal-work with the tension between the (informal) desire to learn/build relationships and the (formal) demands for results and value creation.

Value- show the value the community creates for its members, the teams they are in support of, and the organization.

Build on the existing culture- leverage the core values already found within the organization rather than trying to take on the entire culture of an organization.

Pace the initiative-expect the initiative to take time, set expectations to allow a natural rhythm to unfold.

(pp. 192-195)

These familiar phases to building a knowledge system were also revisited in Chapter nine

Prepare → Launch → Expand → Consolidate → Transform

Chapter 10 stepped back to a much broader focus, the authors suggested that it was indeed feasible to apply the concept of the community of practice to the global context, rather than just one organization or group of organizations. The following quote outlines many of the ideas found in this chapter and provides some food for thought at the closing of the book.

“What if this book were simply giving voice to a broader groundswell? What if communities of practice transformed the ways we think about organizing? What if they became the core building blocks of organizations in the future? What if businesses started to organize their suppliers and their markets as communities? What if shared practice became the foundation of civic communities? And what if citizens started to design their world on the model of fractal communities, linking local and global practice development? In other words, if you were the CKO of the world, how would you design your knowledge initiative?” (p. 219)

Chapter

10

REWEAVING THE WORLD

A Critical Examination

In *Cultivating Communities of Practice* the authors have delivered a comprehensive look at what they conceive as the history, steps to develop and maintain, problems to mediate, and future potential of knowledge communities. This book was highly informative and did an excellent job of uncovering the roots of what we see in contemporary PLCs, as well as offering a great resource for those looking to optimize their value.

Three main areas of potential further thought/ possibilities for additional research came to mind while reading this piece, each of which will be discussed in brief. These included; the connection between collaboration in the past compared with deliberate learning communities of today, how to secure organizational buy-in for a grassroots community of practice, and the viability of the vision of widespread learning communities as becoming societal units of organization.

Firstly, the authors traced a history of communities of practice as far back as prehistoric times, theorizing that early humans would have met to discuss optimal hunting methods etc. While some similarities exist, the fact that people collaborated or worked together may not be enough to establish this and others as historical examples of learning communities. For example, most families today would qualify as a community of practice under that definition and this would also reduce the importance of the many ingredients, steps, and requirements for starting a learning community that the authors put forth. Further attention to the similarities and differences between historical human collaboration and communities of practice would be an interesting line of research.

Second, another avenue of research which would be of interest is the process of starting a community of practice from the grassroots level, rather than as an organizational leader or administrator- and how best to secure organizational support for the use of “company time” for the purposes of learning community activities.

Thirdly, the authors provided an optimistic suggestion for the future in which communities of practice become so widespread that they become building blocks of society. This would require a major reset of taken for granted lines of thought and buy-in from not only members and an organization but at the societal, even global level. Could this be taking things a little too far? Further research or work in this area would be interesting to build upon what the authors have started here.

All in all, this book has been a great read for an EADM student, particularly when operating from a human resources management perspective that examines how people benefit and benefit from organizations and structures within them such as communities of practice.



Application to Practice

Cultivating Communities of Practice is nearly a perfect blueprint for creating, maintaining, and profiting from a knowledge community. In the context of human resources management in education, the clear application is to Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

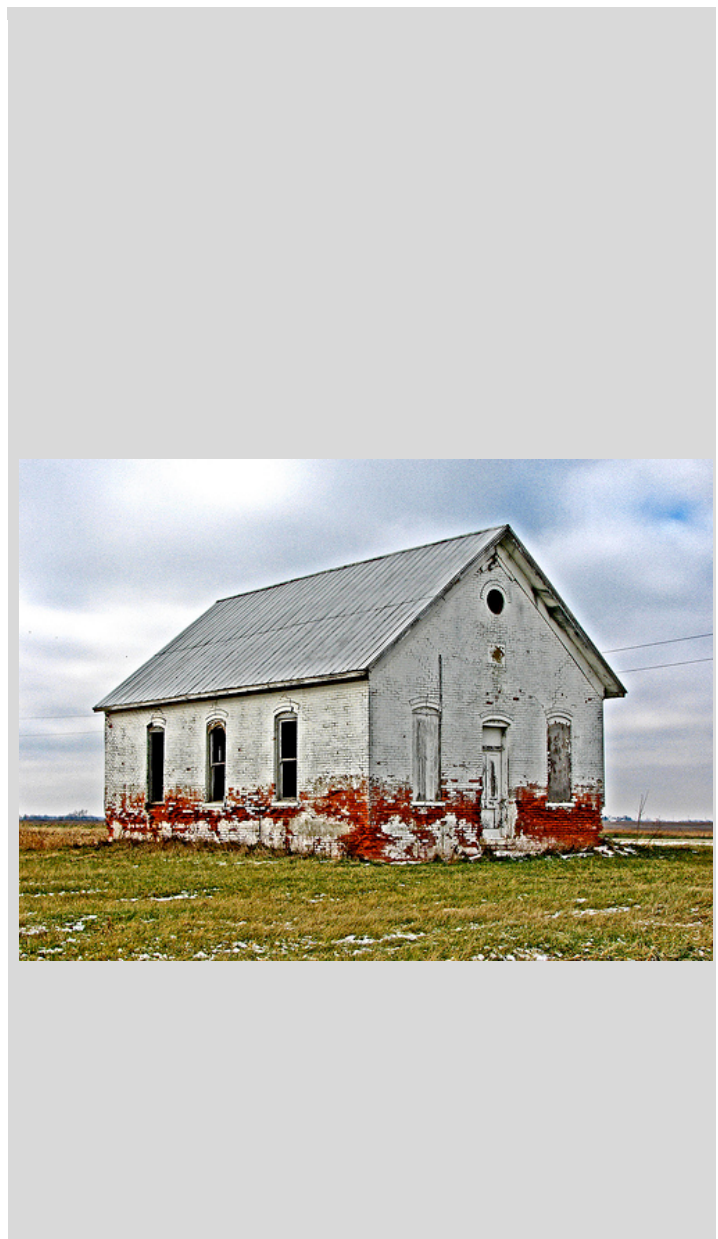
The steps to plan, launch, expand, and consolidate such a body, as well as the identification of common problems and how to deal with them are of the highest utility to anyone involved in creating and optimizing PLCs.

Additionally, the benefits of sharing knowledge within such a community are numerous and of high attention to HR professionals.

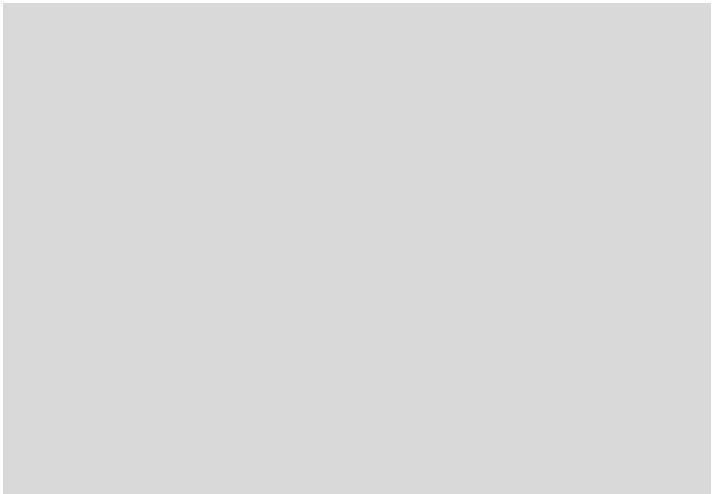
Firstly, the relationships and trust built within the community would logically help with loyalty and retention issues- questions asking whether you feel part of something important are seen many times over on job satisfaction surveys.

Having staff actively sharing their expertise on a regular basis would possibly also reduce the need for formal training/professional development that all too often must use a “scattergun” strategy where people get training whether it applies to them or not- I recall seeing many shop teachers blithely sitting through hours of professional development for teaching literacy because *most* teachers needed it.

Lastly, the value of optimizing practice could not be



nigrier when it comes to the teaching of children who normally only get one chance as a grade x student. Sharing and consolidating knowledge about how best to teach that grade or subject could not be more important- truly making the most of the *human* resources within the school/division.



Points of Discussion

1

In what ways do the communities of practice discussed in this book resemble Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as implemented in Chinook SD? In what ways do they differ?

2

How much hand should upper administration have in governing communities of practice, such as PLCs, and why?

3

Can true communities of practice be deliberately created or do they need to erupt on their own, as the authors described happening historically (with medieval guilds for example)?

Is the idea proposed by the authors in the final chapter about communities of practice becoming the basic building block of organizations, even societies a viable one? Why or why not?

Fin