

The background of the cover is black, featuring several large, stylized circular patterns. Each pattern is composed of numerous thin, light-colored lines radiating outwards from a central point, creating a sunburst or starburst effect. The lines vary in length and are arranged in a somewhat irregular, organic fashion, giving the overall design a sense of movement and complexity.

WORKING METHODS  
FOR KNOWLEDGE  
MANAGEMENT

THE KNOWLEDGE  
OF COMMUNITIES

NANCY MEYER  
LENI OMAN  
JOHN S. EDWARDS  
ALEXEIS GARCIA-PEREZ  
DENISE BEDFORD  
PAT KERRIGAN

# **The Knowledge of Communities**

# WORKING METHODS FOR KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Knowledge Economies and Knowledge Work

*Bill Lafayette, Wayne Curtis, Denise Bedford, and Seema Iyer*

Knowledge Assets and Knowledge Audits

*Pawan Handa, Jean Pagani, and Denise Bedford*

Critical Capabilities and Competencies for Knowledge Organizations

*Alexeis Garcia-Perez, Juan Gabriel Cegarra-Navarro, Denise Bedford, Margo Thomas, and Susan Wakabayashi*

Designing and Tracking Knowledge Management Metrics

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Knowledge Ethics for the Knowledge Economy

*Jelina Haines, Norman Mooradian, Benjamin Anyacho, Cynthia Hilsinger, Malgorzata Zieba, Denise Bedford*

Knowledge Societies – Places and Spaces

*Jayne Sappington, Alexeis Garcia-Perez, and Denise Bedford*

# The Knowledge of Communities

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# Contents

About the Authors	<i>vii</i>
Introduction to the Series – Working Methods for Knowledge Management	<i>ix</i>
Preface	<i>xi</i>
<b>Section 1 Communities of Practice: The Big Picture</b>	
<b>Chapter 1 Communities of Practice: Expanding the View</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2 An Extended Conceptual Model of a Community of Practice</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Section 2 The Community Component</b>	
<b>Chapter 3 The Community as a Collective</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Chapter 4 The Community as Members and Memberships</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Chapter 5 Community Growth, Development, and Duration</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Chapter 6 Community Scale and Complexity</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Section 3 The Learning Component</b>	
<b>Chapter 7 Situational and Experiential Learning</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>Chapter 8 Learning and Knowledge Capital</b>	<b>139</b>

<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>Levels of Learning in Communities of Practice</b>	<i>155</i>
<b>Chapter 10</b>	<b>Learning Cultures of Communities of Practice</b>	<i>169</i>
	<b>Section 4 The Practice Component</b>	
<b>Chapter 11</b>	<b>Practice: How the Community Works</b>	<i>183</i>
	<b>Section 5 The Domain Component</b>	
<b>Chapter 12</b>	<b>Domain, Purpose, and Goals of Communities of Practice</b>	<i>201</i>
	<b>Section 6 Health and Wellness of Communities of Practice</b>	
<b>Chapter 13</b>	<b>States of Health and Wellness of Communities of Practice</b>	<i>227</i>
<b>Chapter 14</b>	<b>Cultivating Communities of Practice</b>	<i>239</i>
	Appendix 1: Pulling It All Together	<i>249</i>
	Appendix 2: Future Research Topics for Communities of Practice	<i>257</i>
	Index	<i>259</i>

## About the Authors

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# Introduction to the Series – Working Methods for Knowledge Management

Knowledge sciences as a discipline has a rich and diverse history dating back to the 1950s. In the past 70 years, the discipline has drawn theory and practice from economics, engineering, communications, learning sciences, technology, information sciences, psychology, social sciences, and business and organization management. To craft this discipline, we have developed our own language and terminologies, established our own peer-reviewed journals and built a rich research foundation, created gray literature, and established a series of networks and conferences. Over the decades, there have been many knowledge management education programs, but there is no consistent curriculum, and few have been sustained. It has been challenging for new practitioners to gain an understanding of the field. While the practice of knowledge management is growing around the world, it has not yet achieved the expected organizational stature. For knowledge management to rise to the stature of other business functions and operations, it must be able to speak the language of business and align with and support the way the organization works.

This series is designed for business and knowledge management practitioners. Working Methods for Knowledge Management is a multi-year and multi-volume series designed to address each and all of the methods required to establish and sustain an organization-wide knowledge management function. The goal of the series is to provide a business perspective on each topic. Each book begins by grounding the method in the business context – and then translates established business models and methods to a knowledge management context. It is often the case that this translation expands and extends the business model and method.

The knowledge management literature is rich with introductory handbooks, guidebooks, cookbooks, toolkits, and practical introductions. This literature is an important starting point for anyone new to the discipline. We recommend any and all of these books as a way to build a fundamental understanding of the scope and coverage of the field. These texts will provide a good 10–20 page introduction to all of the key issues you need to be aware of as you embark on a new career in the field or have been assigned a new knowledge management role or responsibility. Once you have that grounding, though, we recommend that you look to the Working Methods for Knowledge Management texts as an intermediate source for understanding “What comes next? What now?”

Just as this series is not intended as a starting point for the field, neither is it an ending point. Each text is designed to support practical application and to foster a broader discussion of practice. It is through practical application and extended

discussion that we will advance theory and research. The editors anticipate that as the practice expands, there will be a need to update the texts – based on what we are learning. Furthermore, the editors hope the texts are written in a way that allows business managers to extend their work to include knowledge management functions and assets. We will learn most from expanding the discussion beyond our core community.

## **Joint Enterprise, Mutual Engagement, and a Shared Repertoire**

From the outset, the publisher and the editors have established a new and different approach to designing and writing the books. Each text is supported by a team of authors who represent multiple and diverse views of the topic. Each team includes academics, practitioners, and thought leaders. Every author has grappled with the topic in a real-world context. Every author sees the topic differently today than they did when the project began. Over the course of several months, through weekly virtual discussions, the scope and coverage were defined. Through mutual engagement and open sharing, each team developed a joint enterprise and commitment to the topic that is enduring. Every author learned through the discussion and writing process. Each project has resulted in a new shared repertoire. We practiced knowledge management to write about knowledge management. We “ate our own dog food.”

## **Acknowledgments of Early Support**

The series is a massive effort. If there is value in the series, much of the credit must go to two individuals – Dr Elias Carayannis, George Washington University, and Dr Manlio Del Giudice, University of Rome. It was Dr Carayannis who first encouraged us to develop a proposal for Emerald Publishers. Of course, this encouragement was just the most recent form of support from Dr Carayannis. He has been a mentor and coach for close to 20 years. It was Dr Carayannis who first taught me the importance of aligning knowledge management with business administration and organizational management. Dr Del Giudice has been generous with his guidance – particularly in setting a high standard for any and all knowledge management research and practice. We are grateful to him for his careful review and critique of our initial proposal. His patience and thoughtful coaching of colleagues are rare in any field. The field will reach its full potential as long as we have teachers and editors like Dr Del Giudice.

# Preface

## Overview of the Subject Matter

Communities of practice (CoPs) have existed for millennia. They are natural social structures in any society, from the guilds of the middle ages to the academies, societies, and soirees of the Enlightenment, farmers cooperatives of the 19th and 20th centuries, social aid groups, and the craft and gardening groups of today. CoPs are everywhere in our lives, and we belong to many of them, playing different roles in each. While CoPs have always existed, it is only recently that we have become aware of them from a scholarly perspective. De Solla Price and others first raised our awareness of them through their work on Invisible Colleges. In the 1990s, thought leaders in the field of knowledge sciences (Wenger, Lave, St. Onge, Seely-Brown, McDermott) defined a conceptual model that has formed the basis of a new body of research. The traditional model has been the foundation for research for the past 25 years.

The early work resonated with organizations and groups across the world and across economic sectors. We can find functioning CoPs in every society at every level supporting every interest. The widespread adoption of CoPs and the lessons learned from their experiences now form the foundation of our knowledge. Also noteworthy is the growth and awareness of CoPs beyond organizations. Examples from beyond organizations have provided the most significant insights and opportunities to expand the theory. While the knowledge sciences treatment of CoPs has remained stable, case studies and practical examples from other disciplines have grown exponentially. Our lead author, John Edwards, often reminds us that today's research is developing from practice.

This book's purpose and focus is to integrate all we have learned from practice over the past 25 years into a new conceptual model. Moreover, it will elaborate on what has been learned about each new model component. However, what we have learned from practice has also reminded us of the roots of CoPs. The book also provides deeper insights into how communities function, how domains influence communities and practice, and the grounding of practice in psychology, behavioral sciences, and communication. More importantly, the book calls out a less visible but core element of CoPs – situational and experiential learning. In the past 25 years, our understanding of the value and importance of situational learning has evolved. We now have a more profound understanding of its critical role in a knowledge economy.

## **Where the Topic Fits in the World Today**

CoPs play a critical role today in the rapidly evolving knowledge economy. CoPs are a primary source of knowledge production, absorption, and distribution in a knowledge economy. They support learning of any topic or trade. They support any style of learning. If learning is the engine of economic growth in a knowledge economy, CoPs are production hubs. Knowledge economies thrive on the production and consumption of knowledge at any and every level of a society by every member of that society and every type of knowledge. CoPs will be among the most effective sources of economic growth in the future. Every member of any society can leverage CoPs to improve their chances of success in a knowledge economy.

At the outset of this book, the authors argue that CoPs are important engines of knowledge creation, access, use, and assessment. Over the last year, the authors have shared and critically reviewed close to 100 examples of CoPs. About 48 of these examples are included in the text. The examples came from the peer-reviewed and gray literature, as well as from personal experiences. The critical review and analysis produced several insights into where and how CoPs will play an important role in the knowledge economy. The overall insight is that it is well known to economists and policymakers that industrial economies naturally generate externalities, and some of these externalities have negative consequences. It is also well known that industrial economies do not have solutions for all economic problems or situations – there are natural gaps. We also know that industrial economies must shift how they see knowledge and account for humans in market system models.

What we have observed across the case studies is that CoPs appear to emerge and offer alternative solutions and remedies for (1) situations with negative externalities, (2) instances where competitive markets fail, and (3) address the needs of increasingly prevalent cooperative, cooperative, and collusive market conditions. As the authors advance their collaborative research and discussions, we will continue to monitor these three insights to see if they hold.

## **Where the Book Fits in the Literature Today**

The treatment of the CoPs as a specialized discipline has remained unchanged for the past 25 years. What has changed dramatically, though, is our knowledge of how CoPs actually function – what makes them work, what causes them to succeed or fail, how they actually evolve, and how varied they are in duration. From real-world examples, we understand why it is important to understand community composition, the criticality of relationships and interactions, and recognizing and nourishing both members and membership. We also have a greater understanding of how domains can affect situational learning, practice, and social relationships that define the community. Learning from practice has also taught us that traditional assessment and evaluation approaches do not work for successful CoPs. Instead, a diagnostic and remedy approach is more effective.

In the past 25 years, there have been few attempts to expand the theory from practical examples and experiences. The original conceptual model has remained unchanged. This book updates and expands the original model. Situational learning was highlighted as a core aspect of CoPs, yet it was not present or visible in the traditional model. As a result, it was overlooked by practitioners. Additionally, it was often challenging for practitioners to distinguish between two components – domain and practice. The expanded model addresses and clarifies those elements.

The authors suggest that the book is essential for any entity interested in forming or sustaining a community of practice (CoP) in the real world. The research supporting this book has also highlighted the critical role that any CoP will play in developing knowledge economies. CoPs are the new place and space where knowledge is created, shared, leveraged, and passed on to others. If learning is the fuel that produces knowledge, and if knowledge is the core capital of a knowledge economy, it follows that CoPs will be the engines of economic growth.

## **The Intended Audience for the Book**

The book is written from a knowledge sciences perspective. The authors have synthesized and integrated what has been learned from practical applications in medicine, education, politics, community organizing, forestry, manufacturing, economic development, crafts, gardening, emergency response and disaster management, rescue groups, refugee communities, and many others into a new model. While the new model builds on the traditional model developed by knowledge scientists, the scope now includes ties to other source disciplines such as sociology, psychology, behavioral sciences, communication sciences, and, most critically, new theories in learning and education sciences.

The book is written for knowledge management practitioners and professionals who are creating and nourishing practice communities. It is also written for knowledge management academics and researchers interested in expanding the theory of CoPs. Perhaps more importantly, the book is intended for practitioners in every discipline and walk of life who are engaged in or interested in advancing CoPs. It includes business managers, sociologists, psychologists, teachers and trainers, community organizers, social workers, religious societies, gardening communities, and many others.

## **Structure of the Book**

The book is organized into 6 sections and 14 chapters. Section 1 sets a context for expanding our view and understanding of CoPs. It takes as a foundation the early models and theories of CoPs but expands them to include what has been learned through practice. Section 2 explores the community component in depth, exploring the community as a whole, the community as members, the growth patterns and life spans of communities, and the community scale. Section 3 provides a deeper dive into the learning component of CoPs. The authors explore situational and experiential learning, how learning develops knowledge capital, the levels of

learning, and learning cultures. Section 4 focuses on the practice component and explains the abstract concepts of mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise. Section 5 explores the domain aspects of CoPs. The authors consider domains that are beyond and within the traditional organizational perspective. Finally, Section 6 provides a new approach to assessing the health and wellness of a CoP through diagnostics and remedies rather than assessment and evaluation. The section also considers the cultivation of each of the components of a CoP.

Each chapter is written like a project description. While the authors can explain how to establish the foundation for and how to conduct assessments, we cannot tell you what to do and what the result should be. Only each organization can make these choices and decisions. Each chapter provides background information on the topic as well as references to additional resources – both theory and practice. Each chapter highlights the thought leaders and practitioners in that topic. Finally, Appendix 1 provides a high-level project plan that the reader can use to design their own approach. Each task and subtask in the project plan traces back to a chapter in the book.

## **Chapter Summaries**

Chapter 1 addresses the important role that CoPs play in a knowledge economy – as engines of economic growth. The chapter includes both historical and current examples of CoPs. The authors highlight the importance of learning from practical applications today and make the case for expanding the traditional model of a CoP and placing situated learning at the heart of a new model. Furthermore, the chapter advances the argument for looking beyond organizational boundaries to see the full spectrum and nature of CoPs.

In Chapter 2, the authors make the case for developing a conceptual model as a foundation for understanding, research, management, and cultivation. Conceptual models are defined and described. The components of the expanded model are identified. The interdisciplinary nature of CoPs is highlighted, and components are traced to contributing disciplines. Expanding the model surfaces additional essential factors that were hidden in earlier models.

Chapter 3 focuses on the community component of the model. The treatment of community in knowledge sciences is compared and contrasted with its treatment in sociology. The authors address historical criticisms of CoPs from sociologists to deepen knowledge of science professionals' understanding of the community component. The chapter also aims to heighten awareness of lessons learned about the community component over the past 70 years. The chapter also highlights the need to understand invisible and visible community structures. It also stresses the importance of building strong and varied types of relationships and supporting a spectrum of interactions.

Chapter 4 focuses on individual members' roles in the community component. It speaks to the importance of engaging members to create the community component. The authors stress the importance of recognizing and supporting members' communication and learning styles, valuing the individual cultures they bring, and recognizing the challenges of multi-demographic communities. The

authors also reassure readers that the ebb and flow of members to and from the community is natural. The chapter speaks to the challenges of building a shared purpose and shared goals among individuals.

Chapter 5 presents a fresh perspective on community growth, life spans, and development patterns. It reframes the life cycle model as a life span model and categorizes duration as short, medium, and long. The authors describe eight growth patterns common to CoPs and recommend the patterns as archetypes for further study. In developing the new perspective, the authors explain how they drew from research and practice in sociology, mathematics, biology, and environmental sciences. Applying duration observations to real-world case studies surfaced CoPs with short, medium, and long durations.

In Chapter 6, the authors address a dimension overlooked in earlier models – the scale of a CoP. While the scale was not addressed in the knowledge sciences treatment of a community, there is much to learn from sociology, urban studies, education sciences, economic development, and transportation. The authors explain how the expanded model accommodates scale and how scale can affect community topography, structure, relationships, interactions, and learning. The authors also consider how scale can affect the practice. CoPs that adapt to changes in scale are described as elastic, whereas those that do not are described as inelastic.

In Chapter 7, the authors explain that learning is a social process. The evolution of thought leaders behind both situational and experiential learning is presented. The authors explain how calling out the learning component of the conceptual model allows us to more clearly see the expanded learning potential of a CoP. While CoPs accommodate and support all forms of learning, they are exceptional sources for situational and experiential learning. CoPs can also accommodate any new learning spheres – resource-based, in-the-job, on-the-job, lifelong, and life-wide learning.

Chapter 8 covers knowledge capital and explains why and how CoPs are effective hubs for growing human, structural, and relational capital. The chapter calls out the shift in a critical value proposition from creating tangible to intangible capital. The variant economic properties of knowledge are described. The authors explain how new forms of capital and properties require new forms of learning – tied not to a single job but to generating knowledge capital.

In Chapter 9, the authors describe three new levels of learning, all of which are supported by CoPs. The expanded levels increase opportunities for social, situational, and experiential learning. Early organizational learning theories are aligned with learning methods in this chapter. Learning levels are also aligned with the types of knowledge capital. The authors also identify and explain the important role that team learning methods can play in enhancing the value of situational and experiential learning for members and the community. Finally, the chapter highlights the effects that levels of learning have on the other three components of the model.

In Chapter 10, the authors highlight the critical role that culture plays in realizing any strategy. The importance of grounding learning cultures in the theory and practice of culture is emphasized. The relationships between learning cultures and knowledge and collaboration cultures are discussed. Best practice examples

of learning cultures' assumptions, beliefs, and values are cited. The authors also highlight the critical role that CoPs can play in engendering a culture of learning from mistakes.

Chapter 11 clarifies and explains in plain words the concept of practice – practice is the how of how we work together. The abstract descriptions of mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise are explained through practical examples. The authors distinguish the practice and domain components. About 13 traditional and 8 new methods for creating an effective practice are described. Finally, the authors explain how practice interacts with and affects the other three components.

Chapter 12 expands the definition of the domain, drawing from the literature on professions, career development, sectors, and educational sciences. They expand the traditional definition of the domain beyond boundaries, scope, and identity to include 10 additional factors in the literature. The chapter also considers how the domain influences and sometimes impedes the development of the other three components of the model.

In Chapter 13, the authors explain why traditional assessment and evaluation methods are ill-suited to supporting a CoP. A new diagnostic and remedy approach, aligned with new strategic management, is better aligned with a dynamic and chaotic knowledge economy. The application of diagnostics to individual components is also suggested. A full CoP diagnostic is the aggregate of component diagnostics. The authors define several states of health observed in real-world CoPs. Practical examples also suggest that individual components require different remedies and solutions to maintain a healthy state.

Chapter 14 elaborates on approaches to nourishment, cultivation, and remedies that are well suited to a CoP and its components. The authors highlight the good advice provided in the traditional literature by thought leads but expand it to address each component of the model. To discover an expanded set of methods, the authors look to the learning sciences, communication and behavioral sciences, and sociology. This final chapter brings the reader back full circle to the interdisciplinary nature of CoPs.

## **How the Book Impacts the Field**

By the field, the authors mean both the theory and the practice of CoPs. First, this book is a significant update and expansion of the theory behind CoPs. It ties together the theory of related disciplines to the theory of CoPs. The book also highlights areas where additional research is needed. Most importantly, though, the book highlights the need for a shift of focus in the field – from pure theory to theory and research grounded in practice. Second, this book is intended to provide practical guidance to individuals who are engaged in building and sustaining CoPs – regardless of whether they know the theory. The authors hope that copies of the book in the hands of practitioners will be highly marked up, commented on working copies. Ideally, the authors hope that practitioners will bring their observations and ideas back to the field of knowledge sciences so we can continue to evolve the model and our understanding.

## **Special Note from the Authors**

The content of this book was strengthened and tested by 22 students from Georgetown University Communication, Culture and Technology graduate program's CoPs course in the academic years 2023 and 2024. Many of the ideas for vignettes were contributed by students either through discussions or in takeaways. The rigor of several chapters is due to their critical thinking and questions. Over the course of two academic years, these students tested, applied, critiqued, and revised the conceptual model. Without their ideas and suggestions, the book would not have achieved its current state. The authors are grateful to each of these students for sharing their ideas and learning along with us:

Noor Abu-Khadija	Anika Maney	Nate Ha
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Tianyi Ma	Vibhavari Desai	

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Section 1

## **Communities of Practice: The Big Picture**

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## Chapter 1

# Communities of Practice: Expanding the View

### Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the authors discuss the important role that CoPs play in a knowledge economy – as engines of economic growth. The chapter includes both historical and current examples of CoPs. The authors highlight the importance of learning from practical applications today and make the case for expanding the traditional model of a CoP and placing situated learning at the heart of a new model. Furthermore, the chapter advances the argument for looking beyond organizational boundaries to see the full spectrum and nature of CoPs.

### Why We Care About Communities of Practice (CoPs)

Over the past 70 years, the economy has shifted from an advanced industrial economy to a knowledge-based economy. In an industrial economy, physical capital (land, equipment, buildings), and financial capital were the primary factors of production and source of wealth. A knowledge economy is one in which knowledge is capital and is equivalent to the raw materials, labor, and financial capital of the industrial economy (Carlaw et al., 2006). Houghton and Sheehan (2000) suggest that a knowledge economy is one in which knowledge generation and exploitation are the predominant sources of wealth creation. Powell and Snellman (2004) suggest that knowledge will fuel our 21st-century economic systems.

Communities of Practice (CoPs) create strategic value for individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and states. They do so by (1) connecting people and knowledge, (2) preserving knowledge, (3) promoting innovation, (4) facilitating participation in value-creating networks, (5) promoting the development of capabilities and competencies, and (6) encouraging learning and collaboration.

CoP are an effective mechanism for expanding the spread and speed at which knowledge is exchanged, thus creating knowledge capital (Bates, 2014; Mohajan, 2017). CoPs are engines of economic growth and places where people from every

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**The Knowledge of Communities:**

**Working Methods for Knowledge Management, 3–18**

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#### 4 The Knowledge of Communities

walk of life can learn and develop their knowledge capital. They also create and leverage human, structural, and relational capital to create new opportunities, solve problems, engage in productive inquiry, create new capabilities, and refresh a community's knowledge capital base. Communities of practice (CoPs) are essential to developing the knowledge economy.

### Communities of Practice – Definition and Characterization

CoPs are groups of people bound together – formally, informally, inherently, or by affiliation – by shared interests, expertise, and passion for a joint purpose (Block, 2018). They are comprised of people who share their experiences and knowledge to solve problems, promote the spread of best practices, and develop the knowledge capital of each of their members. CoPs enable members to take collective responsibility for creating and stewarding the knowledge they need. CoPs bridge knowledge creation, learning, and performance (Cox, 2005; Hoadley, 2012; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Wenger, 2004; Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

According to the knowledge sciences literature, to be successful, a CoP must have three essential components (Fig. 1), including:

- A *domain* that defines the scope and purpose, and a shared understanding of the community's goals and purpose.
- A *community* is both a collective entity and the individual members who come together to develop a joint enterprise, work together, and collaborate.
- A *practice* involves developing a way of working together, a set of protocols, conventions, and ways of doing things, and a repertoire of activities and interactions.

Although not called out in the traditional model, joint situational, experiential, and transformative *learning* is an essential fourth component (Brown &

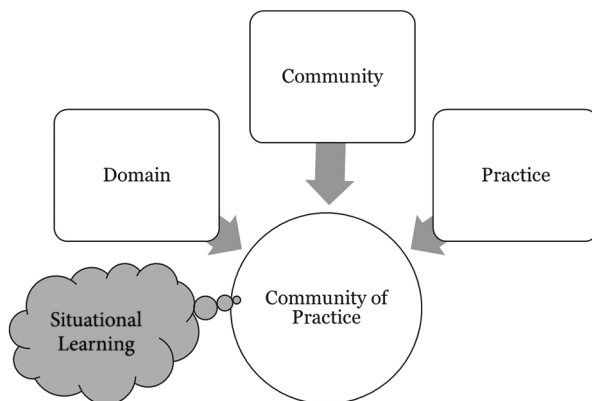


Fig. 1. Knowledge Sciences Characterizations of the Dimensions of a Community of Practice.

Duguid, 1991, 2007, 2009; Orr, 2016). Specifically, situational learning is the core activity of any CoP (Brown et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991a, 1991b). As you will see as you read through the book, whether a community learns, creates, shares, exchanges, and leverages knowledge distinguishes it from any other type of community.

## **Current State of the Field – Communities of Practice**

The term CoP originates in a field of learning theory that focuses on apprenticeships and the role of a community in developing a living-learning agenda. Wenger (1999) built upon this theory to develop new ideas around transformative, experiential, and situational learning. Wenger (1999) has successfully argued that, like apprenticeship models, CoP are prime mechanisms for situational and experiential learning, generating knowledge capital and the networks through which knowledge flows. Wenger (2004) and Lave (1991) expanded this core learning theory to include the two new dimensions of practice and domain. These early thought leaders drew upon theory and practice in various subjects, including sociology, anthropology, learning theory, psychology, and archeology.

While the theory and conceptual models of CoPs were grounded in learning sciences, they were articulated and applied by researchers and practitioners in the field of knowledge sciences. In the early years of the field – the 1990s – the field focused mainly on using knowledge sciences to enhance organizations' business value and capital assets. More than 30 years of research and practical experience have taught us that CoPs are not limited to formal structures and institutions. They are found in every area of the globe, every state, organization, community, and group. They create connections among people across structures and geographic boundaries. In this book, the authors go beyond the boundaries of organizations to consider CoPs in the larger society. The authors adopt Wenger's classic definition of a Community of Practice (1990) as the working definition. To paraphrase Wenger, a CoP is a group of people who share a common interest, passion, challenge, or goal and who grow. To paraphrase Wenger, a community of practice is a group of people who share a common interest, passion, challenge, or goal and who grow their knowledge by interacting on an ongoing basis.

As a result of the earlier focus, our current understanding of CoPs is incomplete. To meet the challenges of the knowledge economy, it is critical to expand our understanding of how they work, what comprises a community, how they behave in different domains, how they grow and develop, and their structures, sizes, and states. This deeper understanding comes through learning to see existing CoPs, explore their dimensions, and synthesize what is known about them from other fields such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, education, and communication sciences.

Knowledge scientists maintain that a CoP is not merely a community of interest—people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a CoP must be practitioners. Knowledge sciences have tended to exclude communities of interest and advocacy as not genuine CoPs. This interpretation has led us to exclude or overlook some critical aspects and elements of CoPs. Rather, the

authors expand the scope and coverage of the field to include the deeper representation of communities by sociologists.

### **Communities of Practice as Learning Systems**

As Toffler (2022) reminds us, the illiterate of the 21st-century knowledge economy will not be those who cannot read or write but those who cannot learn. People are the source of knowledge, and knowledge is the fuel, the primary production factor, the input, and the output of a knowledge economy. CoPs will be the primary sources of and spaces for learning in the knowledge economy because they accommodate various learning spheres and methods and support situations (Lave & Wenger, 1991a, 1991b; Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014) and experiential learning (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). By situational and experiential learning, we mean learning by doing, learning on the job, learning in the job, and lifelong and life-wide learning.

*In knowledge sciences, communities of practice are defined as sustained learning partnerships among people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.* While not explicitly called out in the early conceptual models, learning is the core process of any CoP. Learning in a CoP is joint, situational, experiential, and transformative. It is learning among adults. It is learning to solve real-world and applied problems. Learning in CoPs is holistic. Learning is social – engaging, immersive, situational, transformative, and experiential. It is multi-level, simultaneously individual and collective. It is a full cycle – regenerative and mistake-tolerant. – we must learn, unlearn, relearn – the knowledge economy grows and expands through the surfacing and filling of gaps. Moreover, it is contextual – it must occur in all five types of learning spheres – in the classroom, on the job, in the job, lifelong, and life-wide.

People are the source of knowledge, and knowledge is the fuel, the primary production factor, the input, and the output of a knowledge economy. CoPs are learning hubs that individuals can create to address specific learning needs and fill the knowledge gaps of a knowledge economy. CoPs have lower entry barriers and support different levels of participation and engagement. One can learn by being a peripheral member. CoPs are an excellent complement to formal learning systems. CoPs will be the primary sources of and spaces for learning in the knowledge economy because they accommodate various learning spheres and methods and support situations and experiential learning.

### **What We Learned from Real-world Communities of Practice**

We know much more about CoPs in 2025 than in 1995. What we have learned has come from practice and real-life experiences, many falling outside formal organizations. The following vignettes are a sample of the examples from which the authors have learned over time. The examples are anonymized versions of the

authors' real experiences. The vignettes are designed to broaden the reader's perspective on what forms a CoP may take and how each of the four dimensions may vary while still meeting the fundamental definition. In this chapter, the authors present nine vignettes.

***Vignette 1. Women's Neighborhood Community of Practice.***

*Community.* The community consisted of women living in a common neighborhood, who were all part of an existing social structure. It is a small-scale community. The women had long-term relationships based on caring for the family, chores, raising children, and shared common schooling and activities. The activity started with morning tea and conversation, knowledge sharing around children, family, and other roles associated with women in society. Over time, relationships were strengthened through daily interactions. This community is location-grounded.

*Domain.* The domain of this CoP is social advocacy and newly gained political power. The group aims to raise awareness of and advocate for women's rights, status, and welfare in a society where women are more vulnerable. The group focused on voting rights, women's security and safety, economic welfare, and physical safety. This community became a social and political force over time. The CoP evolved over time from a group of women who lived in a typical neighborhood.

*Learning.* Learning is highly situational. The women came together to learn from each other how to improve their roles and responsibilities. Through sharing common experiences, they discovered other common concerns and began to learn together as a group. The learning was focused on new ideas and new ways of doing things. The learning was both internal to the group and external in that information about their concerns was brought into the group.

*Practice.* Because the women have similar demographics, roles, culture, and knowledge backgrounds, the community has a level of common practice. The growth of the practice centered around developing a shared repertoire and mutual engagement around new issues – political activity, advocacy, safety and security, and women's rights.

*Duration.* This CoP is long-term because of the location and strong community structure, relationships, and interactions.

***Vignette 2. Community Composting Community of Practice.***

*Community.* The composting community began as a grassroots effort to manage urban food waste and evolved into a small business with franchises across the country. The community grew out of a regional and national network of gardeners and environmentalists. The members had indirect

relationships with one another and were distant in terms of familiarity. A social structure formed, though, because members had shared concerns about a growing problem – urban food waste management – and a common interest – small-scale and local agriculture. Individuals built a local network leveraging their connections in the broader network. A social structure and social relationships grew from the new network. With a community structure, the members began engaging to solve the problem.

*Domain.* Composting is the process of recycling organic materials like food scraps and leaves into nutrient-rich compost. Composting is a sub-domain of agriculture, gardening, environmental sciences, biology, botany, and waste management. For this CoP, the boundaries form around practices – industrial, commercial, municipal, and home composting, as well as regional variations due to environmental and food waste types. The compost community developed a unique identity by providing a pickup and mid-scale composting operation working with local farmers.

*Learning.* Situational learning focused on developing a system that picked up household waste in a region, delivering it to local farmers for composting, and making the compost available to local home gardeners for backyard gardening. The community's experiential learning expanded municipal waste management, home gardening, and composting knowledge bases. Experiential learning involves exploring problems, proposing, testing, and socializing solutions.

*Practice.* We see every aspect of practice in this community. Mutual engagement took the form of the members coming together around a common problem and developing ways of working together to define and solve the problem. Joint enterprises evolved from the development of a solution involving many parties that took the form of coming together to define a new food waste management ecosystem. The shared repertoire was a new body of knowledge, which locales nationwide have since adopted – replicated models. Joint enterprise was grounded in a new culture of food waste management and lifestyles. Good practice example of a new kind of knowledge economy enterprise.

### ***Vignette 3. Golf for Kids Community of Practice.***

*Community.* The local golfing community reached out to children of lower-income areas to teach them the sport and introduce them to the business culture of golf, to develop mental and social competencies to succeed in the business world. The goal of the golf outreach community practice pertained to the strategic thinking aspect of the sport. Golf has a well-established community and network. The social structure of golfing is well established, grounded in each local community around a strong set of business