

The potential for

Communities of Practice

to underpin the
National Training Framework

Findings from an evaluation of pilot projects of Communities of Practice
that were managed by Reframing the Future and funded through
the Australian National Training Authority, 2001

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April 2002

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First published 2002

Author: John Mitchell

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in publication data

Australian National Training Authority

The potential for Communities of Practice to underpin the National Training Framework. Findings from an evaluation of pilot projects of Communities of Practice that were managed by Reframing the Future and funded through the Australian National Training Authority, 2001

ISBN 1865064130

331.25920994

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Abbreviations

For brevity, the following abbreviations are used throughout this report:

ACE	Adult and Community Education
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
AQTF	Australian Quality Training Framework
ITAB	Industry Training Advisory Board
NTF	National Training Framework
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Executive Summary

The major theme emerging from this evaluation study is that Communities of Practice in the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia have the potential to accelerate, intensify, enrich and enhance the implementation of the national training system.

Definition

Defined briefly, Communities of Practice are groups of staff bound together by common interests and a passion for a cause, and who continually interact. Communities are sometimes formed within the one organisation, and sometimes across many organisations. They are often informal, with fluctuating membership and people can belong to more than one community at a time. Communities of Practice are different from formal work groups, project teams or informal networks, in emphasising the development of members' capabilities and the building and exchange of knowledge. Additionally, Communities of Practice can:

- change their agenda to suit the needs of the members
- assist with the development of professional skills
- assist in the transfer of good practice
- have long-term benefits on organisational practice and productivity. (Mitchell, Henry & Young, 2001)

Introduction

This report is an evaluation of the sixteen pilot projects that were funded to form Communities of Practice in the VET sector in 2001, as part of the Reframing the Future program.

A total of 344 VET personnel participated in the project and the communities included a group comprising a public registered training organisation (RTO) and wine industry personnel; over eighty on-the-job assessors of workplace training; a group of staff development managers from one State-wide Technical and Further Education (TAFE) network; and a group of female practitioners from an RTO.

This project's evaluation was funded as a 2001 VET National Project entitled 'Establishing National VET Communities of Practice – building the capacity of VET practitioners to implement the National Training Framework'. A description of the project is set out in Appendix 1.

John Mitchell, from John Mitchell & Associates, undertook this evaluation from June 2001 – February 2002. The brief for this project required the consultant to identify, through research and consultation, the processes for establishing VET Communities of Practice nationally. The brief also required the consultant to document examples of good practice arising from the

2001 Networking projects for dissemination to those VET personnel who may be considering the establishment of Communities of Practice. The consultant's brief is set out in Appendix 2. The author greatly appreciates the support of the National Project Director, Susan Young, and the convenors and facilitators named in Appendix 3.

Major findings

Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, 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. (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.4) Australian VET has many such informal groups, but many more could be fostered.

Developing social capital

When appropriately supported by their organisations, these Communities of Practice play a critical role: they are the major building blocks in creating, sharing, and applying organisational knowledge. (Lesser & Prusak, in Lesser et al, 2000, p.124). Ultimately, Communities of Practice contribute to the development of social capital in organisations, defined by Cohen & Prusak (2001) as a company's stock of human connections such as trust, personal networks and a sense of community. Alternatively, lesser (2000) defines social capital as the wealth that exists because of an individual's relationships.

The trusting relationships of VET practitioners, both within their organisation and externally, and with industry and other stakeholders, add value to VET. Communities of Practice place these relationships at centre stage. However, Communities of Practice are a new concept for most VET personnel and the legitimacy of Communities of Practice needs to be established across the system. This report may contribute to the legitimising of communities and social capital in VET.

Structures of communities

For evaluation purposes, the 2001 VET Communities of Practice were deliberately chosen to provide a variety of types of communities, ranging from existing networks of practitioners, to groups that had never come together before, to groups from the TAFE, Private provider and Adult and Community Education (ACE) domains. The positive achievements of this sample of different communities suggest that many different types of Communities of Practice can flourish in the VET sector.

6 ▼ Based on interviews and an analysis of communities' reports, those 2001 communities that engaged a specialist facilitator generally achieved more than those that did not. The 2001 communities may have achieved even more if other roles had been defined beyond the roles of convenor and facilitator, such as subject matter expert, mentor, technologist or administrator. (see Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002)

The 2001 communities were generally effective in community building but less effective in exploring the depths of professional 'practice'. Future VET Communities of Practice may benefit from allocating sufficient human and other resources to capturing the 'practice' that underpins their community: that is, the set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that community members share. (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002)

Fostering and cultivating communities

In modelling the good practice principles advocated by the leading theorists, the convenors and facilitators of the VET Communities of Practice in 2001 collectively used a variety of strategies to cultivate their communities. Individually, no one convenor or facilitator met all the benchmarks identified by the theorists, which is understandable due to the limited time—four months—available for the 2001 projects. Future VET convenors and facilitators of Communities of Practice will benefit from a close analysis of the benchmarks in the literature.

The actions of the 2001 VET convenors and facilitators that met benchmarks set out in the literature included the following: focusing on topics important to both the business and community members; creating forums for thinking; catering for different levels of participation; developing public and private spaces; creating a rhythm; building relationships between members; combining familiarity and excitement; opening up a dialogue between insiders and outsiders; and making it easy to contribute and access the community's knowledge and practice.

Stages of development

Communities of Practice almost never progress simultaneously from one stage to the next, across the five-six consecutive stages of development identified by the theorists. After four months of activity, almost all of the sixteen VET project convenors or facilitators in 2001 considered their whole group or most of their group had progressed to either the second or third stage ('coalescing' or 'active'); one felt her group was still in the initial, 'potential' stage; and none felt they had progressed to stage four, 'dispersed'. Additionally, within each community, different members progressed at different rates.

Challenges

The 2001 VET Communities of Practice experienced a number of the challenges found in the literature, such as communities being seen as marginal or lacking legitimacy or management support; some members being too dependent on the facilitator; some members being dogmatic and refusing to change from their previous networking conventions; and members leaving the community liable to suffer 'amnesia' by not documenting processes.

Benefits

International experience suggests that the benefits of Communities of Practice for individuals include the fostering of trust, improvements to their professional lives, access to new knowledge and an increased ability to manage change. The analysis of the VET 2001 Communities of Practice showed that the benefits matched the theory: the communities fostered communication and sharing and linked the members to new knowledge, while also concretely enhancing the work of the VET professional.

An examination of the literature shows that the organisational benefits of Communities of Practice can include the informal dissemination of valuable information, improvements in productivity, the fostering of innovation and the reinforcement of strategic direction. As a group, the 2001 VET communities achieved all of these organisational benefits.

Impact on the National Training Framework

One reason why the VET Communities of Practice produced such a rich array of benefits is because VET professionals used Communities of Practice to respond constructively to the many challenges of implementing the National Training Framework (NTF). The NTF involves, in part, implementing newly-framed competency-based Training Packages, providing workplace assessment, developing multiple relationships between training providers, industry and individual enterprises and working in a competitive training market.

Implementing the National Training Framework is not simply a matter of delivering a training product. It involves working with the fluidity and unpredictability of relationships between providers and industry. The VET 2001 Communities of Practice focused considerable attention on relationship building.

Some 2001 VET Communities of Practice sought concrete, practical outputs from their community work, such as guides for compliance with AQTF standards, while other communities focused on less tangible issues such as increasing members' confidence in managing the change from curriculum to Training Packages.

Knowledge management

Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, expert insight and grounded intuition. (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, p.5). Communities of Practice make knowledge an integral part of their activities and interactions, and they serve as a living repository for that knowledge. (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p.9). The structure of a Community of Practice for VET provides an ideal platform for the sharing of experience, values, contextual information, expert insight and grounded intuition about the elements of the NTF.

Communities of Practice help to develop the appropriate connections, relationships and context that allow knowledge to flow between those who have knowledge and those who require it. (Lesser and Everest, 2001). This flow of knowledge is essential if the National Training Framework is to be implemented optimally.

Critical success factors

Theorists provide useful criteria for analysing the performance of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice. In their self-evaluations, the 2001 VET communities identified critical success factors that aligned closely with the literature. VET communities also identified a number of variations to the literature that were critical to their success. For instance, McDermott (2000) suggests that it is critical for communities to build on the core values of the organisation, whereas some VET professionals are sessional or part-time staff and do not have one, single organisation as their focal point. These staff often identify primarily with the core values of their professional field.

Sustaining communities

Theorists suggest that Communities of Practice can be sustained through to a mature stage, once a community has demonstrated its value to both members and the organisation. At the mature stage of development, a range of pro-active steps can be taken by convenors of communities, to ensure community development.

Understandably, most, if not all, the 2001 VET communities did not reach a mature stage by the end of their four months of funded activity. Many reached the crucial point where their organisation now needs to confirm that they value the community sufficiently to keep supporting its existence. However, a few communities that have received organisational patronage will definitely continue.

Limitations and potential

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Communities of Practice have limitations because they are difficult to establish and maintain; they can easily develop flaws or experience pitfalls; they add to the complexity of modern organisations more than any other knowledge-based approaches; and they increase the difficulties of managing organisations.

At the heart of all of the 2001 VET communities was human engagement and negotiation around core issues of the NTF: resources, relationships, meanings and a range of professional judgments about pedagogical issues. Communities of Practice are a versatile, flexible space for such human engagement and negotiation. Their potential is profound.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. *Communities of Practice be promoted in VET by Reframing the Future as a useful vehicle for underpinning the implementation of the NTF, through an expansion of the Reframing the Future's sub-program Goal No.4 on Networking/Communities of Practice.*
2. *Communities of Practice funded by Reframing the Future be encouraged to examine three structural concepts of communities: the domain of knowledge; community; and practice.*

3. *Communities of Practice funded by Reframing the Future be encouraged to evaluate themselves in terms of the findings in the literature about how to foster, cultivate and sustain communities.*
4. *Communities of Practice funded by Reframing the Future be encouraged to include members with specific roles such as convenors, facilitators, mentors, subject matter experts, technologists and administrators.*
5. *Reframing the Future provide special support, such as additional workshops or suggested guided reading, for convenors and facilitators of past and current Communities of Practice.*
6. *Research be conducted into the roles played by core community members.*
7. *Communities of Practice funded by Reframing the Future be allocated sufficient time to reach a point of maturity, where members move beyond exchanging tips and ideas to developing and recording a body of knowledge about implementing the NTF.*
8. *Research be conducted of the steps required for VET Communities of Practice to move to a point of maturity.*
9. *Reframing the Future provide ongoing support to previously funded Communities of Practice, to assist these groups to optimise the outcomes from their initial projects.*
10. *Research be conducted on the long-term outcomes of VET Communities of Practice.*
11. *Research be conducted by Reframing the Future into the links between Communities of Practice, knowledge management, social capital, staff skill-building and organisational capability, in the context of RTOs implementing the NTF.*
12. *Research be conducted on measuring the value of VET Communities of Practice in terms of implementing the NTF.*

What are Communities of Practice for VET?

This chapter provides definitions of Communities of Practice in relation to VET and a discussion of their benefits, as a context for evaluating the pilot projects sponsored in 2001 by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) funded program Reframing the Future. By discussing the possible benefits of Communities of Practice for VET, this chapter links to the last chapter of this report on the potential of Communities of Practice for VET.

Main points

The main points made in this chapter are:

1. Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, 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. (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.4). VET has many such informal groups, but more could be fostered.
2. When appropriately supported by the formal organisation these 'Communities of Practice', as they are often called, play a critical role: they are the major building blocks in creating, sharing, and applying organisational knowledge. (Lesser & Prusak, in Lesser et al, 2000, p.124). Communities of Practice are a new concept for VET and their legitimacy needs to be established.
3. Communities of Practice differ from formal work groups, project teams and informal networks by their focus on developing members' capabilities and building and sharing knowledge. Building capabilities and sharing knowledge is vital if VET is to meet increasing demands.
4. The benefits of Communities of Practice include assisting individuals to access new knowledge and to manage change and enabling organisations to transfer good practice, stimulate innovation and reinforce corporate strategic direction. Research suggests that VET will be richer for embracing Communities of Practice.

Definitions

Wenger and Lave (1991) first used the term 'Communities of Practice' in the literature in 1991. Since then, a range of definitions has been developed, but all allude to the value of informal organisational learning and sharing. Sample definitions of Communities of Practice by leading theorists follow:

groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p. 139)

Behind every organisation chart lies informal clusters and networks of employees who work together—sharing knowledge, solving common problems and exchanging insights, stories

and frustrations. When appropriately supported by the formal organisation these 'communities of practice', as they are often called, play a critical role: they are the major building blocks in creating, sharing, and applying organisational knowledge. (Lesser & Prusak, in Lesser et al, 2000, p.124)

...a group whose members regularly engage in sharing and learning, based on their common interests. (Lesser & Storck, 2001, p.831).

Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, 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. (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.4)

The comment by Lesser and Prusak above, that Communities of Practice need appropriate support from the formal organisation, is relevant to VET. Communities of Practice are a new concept for VET and have not yet won widespread legitimacy as mechanisms for capability building, knowledge management and organisational change. It is anticipated that this report will contribute to the legitimising of Communities of Practice.

As collaborative groups within organisations, Communities of Practice could include:

engineers engaged in deep-water drilling, for example, consultants who specialise in strategic marketing, or frontline managers in charge of cheque processing at a large commercial bank. (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p. 139)

VET has many such informal groups, but this report indicates that many more could be fostered. Within the VET sector in Australia, Communities of Practice could be workplace trainers who talk about successful assessment strategies when they meet in work settings; or plumbing lecturers in different States of Australia who communicate regularly by email and at conferences about Training Package issues; or multimedia developers in Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) who share ideas when they gather for regular discussions.

Characteristics

Some key characteristics of Communities of Practice are as follows: they can be informal or formal; there can be many Communities of Practice within a single company and people can belong to more than one of them; and Communities of Practice are different from formal work groups, project teams or informal networks.

A Community of Practice within an organisation does not necessarily imply a well-defined, identifiable group, or visible boundaries:

Some Communities of Practice meet regularly – for lunch on Thursdays, say. Others are connected primarily by email networks... A community can even thrive with members from different companies; for example, the CEOs who make up the Business Roundtable meet regularly to discuss relationships between business and public policy, among other things. (Wenger and Snyder, 200, p. 139-140).

Brown (1999) maintains that there can be many Communities of Practice within a single company and people can belong to more than one of them. He believes that what holds these communities together are 'a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows'. This common sense of purpose can be the pursuit of solutions to a common type of problem (Johnson-Lenz, 1999) or simply common goals (Lesser & Everest, 2001).

Communities of Practice are different from formal work groups, project teams or informal networks. The following table highlights the differences.

Table 1.1: Characteristics of different types of groups (from Wenger and Snyder, 2000)

	What is the purpose?	Who belongs?	What holds it together?	How long does it last?
Community of Practice	To develop members' capabilities; to build and exchange knowledge	Members who select themselves	Passion, commitment, and identification with the group's expertise	As long as there is interest in maintaining the group
Formal work group	To deliver a product or service	Everyone who reports to the group's manager	Job requirements and common goals	Until the next reorganisation
Project team	To accomplish a specified task	Employees assigned by senior management	The project's milestones and goals	Until the project has been completed
Informal network	To collect and pass on business information	Friends and business acquaintances	Mutual needs	As long as people have a reason to connect

The above table shows that a differentiator between Communities of Practice and other organisational groups is the emphasis in Communities of Practice on developing members' capabilities and sharing knowledge.

In its final report for the 2001 Reframing the Future sub-program, the Adult and Community Education (ACE) NSW Metropolitan Managers' Community of Practice described itself using Wenger & Snyder (2000) categories. They identified four purposes for the community, one of which referred to capability building, two of which referred to knowledge sharing and one of which referred to collegial support.

Table 1.2: ACE NSW Metropolitan Managers' Community of Practice self-description (ACE NSW Final Report)

ACE Metropolitan Managers' Community of Practice	What is the purpose?	Who belongs?	What holds it together?	How long does it last?
Metropolitan RTOs from the ACE sector - Community Colleges and WEA	To develop members skills as managers; To increase understanding of the NTF, AQTF in an ACE context; To discuss & debate implementation strategies; To support individuals	Key managers based in ACE RTOs who choose to join the network for their own PD and who seek a better way of doing things through networking	Common issues because of ACE specific context and marketing of VET The desire to reduce isolation as they usually work alone Recognition of specialist expertise from different RTOs contributing to the group.	On-going As long as there is a mutual need Individuals join or leave the group depending on work roles and perceived "value" of the network at various times Depends on time constraints and deadlines at work

The ACE NSW Community of Practice demonstrates a level of awareness of the purpose, membership, unifying factors and likely future life of their Community of Practice that is exemplary. This level of awareness will enable ACE and the community members to benefit significantly from Communities of Practice. This evaluation report is designed to capture such VET exemplars and to contribute to an increase in awareness of the nature and potential benefits of Communities of Practice in VET.

Benefits for individual practitioners

A review of the literature indicates that the benefits of Communities of Practice are normally of two types—benefits for individual practitioners and benefits for individual organisations—and the two sets of benefits can be achieved in the one organisation.

The benefits of Communities of Practice for individual practitioners include the following:

1. Communities of Practice enable employees to manage change
2. they provide the practitioner with access to new knowledge
3. they foster trust and a sense of common purpose in the individual
4. and, overall, they add value to professional lives.

These types of benefits are compatible with an Australian VET system that is placing a strong emphasis on valuing VET personnel as professionals. As a mechanism for knowledge creation and sharing and capability building, Communities of Practice can contribute significantly to the development of 'the VET Professional'.

Each of the above four benefits is discussed below.

By functioning across organisations and drawing on the combined strengths of many colleagues, *Communities of Practice assist practitioners to manage change* occurring both within and outside the organisation. McDermott (2000) points out that communities 'frequently link people with a common interest who do not have regular day-to-day contact' (p. 3). The communities often form around technical disciplines and topics that draw people from many work teams. Wenger and Snyder (2000) note that when a company reorganises into a team-based structure, 'employees with functional expertise may create Communities of Practice as a way of maintaining connections with peers'. They find that people also form communities 'in response to changes originating outside the organisation, such as the rise of e-commerce, or inside, such as new company strategies' (p. 141).

Communities of Practice provide its members with access to new knowledge and the chance to learn. Stewart (1996) describes Communities of Practice as 'groups that learn' where members 'collaborate directly, use one another as sounding boards, and teach each other' (p. 2). This activity empowers individuals, opening up access to new knowledge and skills, and enables individuals to better manage change and to better fulfil the requirements placed on them by their employer.

Communities of Practice foster trust and a sense of common purpose in the individual. Through participating in Communities of Practice, 'members develop the sense of trust and mutual obligation that is critical to encourage contribution and sharing of ideas and knowledge'. (Lesser and Everest, 2001, p. 39). According to McDermott (2000), frank and supportive discussions of real problems frequently build a greater sense of connection and trust between community members. As they share ideas and experiences, 'community members often develop a shared way of doing things, a set of common practices, and a greater sense of common purpose' (p. 4). In the course of helping each other, sharing ideas, and collectively solving problems, individuals 'often become a trusted group of peers' (p. 4).

Communities of Practice add value to professionals' lives not just by sharing knowledge, but also by sharing tools and solutions. Communities of Practice frequently form around topics community members have invested many years in developing. McDermott (2000) maintains,

however, that communities are not just focused on common interests, but on ‘the practical aspects of a particular practice, everyday problems, new tools, developments in the field, and things that do and do not work’ (pp. 2-3). Wenger and Snyder (2000) find that Communities of Practice enable expertise to be transferred across organisations, encouraging the discussion of effective solutions to a range of problems. In this way Communities of Practice add value in both a theoretical and a practical sense.

In a VET sector intensely focused on the change implications of the industry-led National Training Framework, and given the above discussion of the benefits Communities of Practice can provide to individuals, Communities of Practice loom as one constructive way to enable VET personnel to manage change, access new knowledge and develop professionally.

Organisational benefits

The organisational benefits of Communities of Practice include:

1. the informal dissemination of valuable information
2. improvements in productivity
3. the fostering of innovation
4. the reinforcement of strategic direction.

By generating knowledge and encouraging skill development in an atmosphere of trust, *Communities of Practice can stimulate organisational innovation*. Lesser and Everest (2001, p. 39) find that Communities of Practice can ‘provide an important spark for innovation’ through establishing a forum for individuals to share their knowledge and ideas. One practical result is that new lines of business including new products and services are initiated. According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), Communities of Practice are an important knowledge management strategy and as such can contribute to an organisation’s strategic direction (p.140).

Organisational productivity is another major benefit derived from Communities of Practice. Communities of Practice decrease the learning curve for new employees by serving as a vehicle to develop mentoring relationships between junior employees and established practitioners. Lesser and Everest (2001) argue that this helps new employees to understand how their role fits into the wider organisational context and how their job impacts on other individuals and processes. Communities of Practice help companies to match the talents of their staff with internal opportunities. According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), members of Communities of Practice have an understanding of the expertise within their community. Community members can identify opportunities that are tailor-made to their interests and expertise of their colleagues. Communities of Practice also facilitate rapid responses to customer needs and problems. By developing knowledge of its members and their various strengths, Lesser and Everest (2001) believe that Communities of Practice enable organisations to quickly identify individuals with the subject-matter expertise necessary to provide the best answer to a client problem (p. 39).

In theory, all organisations, including VET organisations, could benefit from the potential of Communities of Practice: improved dissemination of information, improved productivity; fostering of innovation; and the reinforcement of strategic direction. An implicit question that this evaluation report addresses is whether Communities of Practice will prosper in the terrain of Australian VET, characterised by the diversity of relationships between training providers, industry clients and students.

VET an exceptional context

While the literature on Communities of Practice identifies potential benefits for both individual practitioners and the organisation, most of the examples in the literature are from large, multinational or national corporations in the commercial sector. Additionally, there are

few examples in the literature of education or training organisations using Communities of Practice. The existing literature does not connect Communities of Practice either directly or indirectly to the mix of public and private sector training organisations, industry bodies and enterprises jointly involved in the implementation of a national training system, as is the mix in the VET sector Australia.

The next chapters of this evaluation report illustrate clearly that Communities of Practice can flourish in the complex terrain of Australian VET, if the preconditions for success exist, such as management support, skilled facilitation and motivated participants. This evaluation of the diverse groups involved in the sixteen Communities of Practice in the 2001 Reframing the Future project promises to enrich, if not extend, the previous boundaries of research into the application of Communities of Practice.

How were the Communities of Practice structured?

This chapter compares the structure of the sixteen Communities of Practice funded by Reframing the Future in 2001 with the structures advocated in the literature. The discussion highlights the importance to communities of a common purpose, clearly defined roles and exploring the dimensions of 'practice', that is, the ideas and tools that community members share.

Key points

Key points in this chapter include:

1. For evaluation purposes, the 2001 VET Communities of Practice were deliberately chosen to provide a variety of types of communities, ranging from existing networks of practitioners, to groups that had never come together before, to groups from the TAFE, Private provider and ACE domains. The positive achievements of this sample of different communities suggest that many different types of Communities of Practice can flourish in the VET sector.
2. Most of the 2001 Communities of Practice were not initiated in a 'bottom-up' or 'top-down' fashion: they were peer-level (formed by and consisting of equal peers in an organisation) or partnership-based (consisting of a mix of VET providers and industry representatives) Communities of Practice. Peer-level or partnership-based Communities of Practice are very appropriate in VET as they encourage peers to share their knowledge and they encourage provider and industry partners to contribute to the common goal of a national training system.
3. Based on interviews and an analysis of communities' reports, those 2001 communities that engaged a specialist facilitator generally achieved more than those that did not. The 2001 communities may have achieved even more if other roles had been defined beyond the roles of convenor and facilitator, such as subject matter expert, technologist or administrator.
4. The 2001 communities were generally effective in community building but less effective in exploring the depths of professional 'practice'. Future VET Communities of Practice may benefit from allocating sufficient human and other resources to capturing the 'practice' that underpins their Community: that is, the set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that community members share.

Background

From August-December 2001, a pilot program involving sixteen Communities of Practice was conducted in the vocational education and training (VET) sector by the Reframing the Future program. Funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), Reframing the Future

is a national staff development, change management and strategic management program designed to assist with the implementation of the national training system.

Networking/Communities of Practice is one of the five goal areas of Reframing the Future. The aims of this goal are to:

1. Build training partnerships by developing networks between different stakeholder groups that are involved in the training industry, such as providers and industry clients, with the emphasis on creating a partnership that previously did not exist or was under-developed.
2. Network for growth by developing partnerships that are specifically focused on increasing the quality and quantity of training, in a specific industry or region.

This evaluation of the Reframing the Future sub-program pilots in 2001 was funded as a VET National Project.

Overview of the 2001 Communities of Practice

The following sample of four communities from the sixteen Communities of Practice in 2001 highlights the variety of groups involved in the sub-program:

1. a group of staff development officers from one State-wide Technical and Further Education (TAFE) network
2. over eighty on-the-job assessors of workplace training in one State
3. a group of female practitioners from a VET registered training organisation (RTO)
4. a collaborative group comprising a public RTO and wine industry personnel.

Each of the sixteen communities was funded on a dollar-for-dollar basis up to a maximum of \$15,000 to facilitate their implementation of an aspect of the National Training Framework (NTF), the industry-led, demand-driven, competency-based national training system for the VET sector.

Focus areas of the Communities of Practice in 2001 included the implementation of the Caravan, Health, Horticulture, Laboratory Operations, Business Services, Print and Graphic Arts and Public Service Training Packages; and assessment, quality and compliance issues of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). Training Packages establish the nationally endorsed standards for an industry or sector. The AQTF provides the basis for a nationally consistent, high quality VET system by identifying standards for RTOs and State and Territory Training Authorities. Implementing Training Packages and complying with national standards are two activities that benefit from the collective knowledge, experience and expertise of colleagues.

A total of 344 personnel actively participated in the sixteen Communities of Practices between August-December 2001. The following table sets out the numbers of participants and the focus of each community.

Many more than the sixteen host organisations were involved in the 2001 projects. For instance, in the TAFE NSW Staff Development Managers' Network, participants were drawn from all eleven TAFE Institutes in New South Wales.

Table 2.1: Focus Areas of the 2001 Reframing the Future Communities of Practice

State/Territory	Coordinating Organisation	Participants	Focus area
Australian Capital Territory	Centrelink	33	National Training Officers' Network, focusing on Recognition of Current Competencies and Recognition of Prior Learning
New South Wales	TAFE NSW Staff Development Managers' Network/ Southern Sydney Institute	15	TAFE NSW Staff Development Managers – Identification of the staff development challenges of implementing third generation curriculum models within the Training Package framework
New South Wales	ACE NSW Metropolitan Managers' community	12	VET managers across the regions collaborating in implementation of the AQTF and Training Packages
Queensland	TAFE Queensland	20	Implementing the Health Training Package throughout Queensland
Queensland	Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE	35	Integrating indigenous education, working with communities in the Institute's catchment area
South Australia/ national	Douglas Mawson Institute of Technology	12	Printing managers from TAFE Institutes in six States and Territories, focusing on change management to facilitate the implementation of the National Training Framework
South Australia	Murray Institute of TAFE	13	Developing partnerships with the wine industry in the Riverland, implementing the Laboratory Operations Training Package
South Australia	SA DETE	10	Human Resources managers from a range of SA Government Departments implementing the Public Services Training Package
Tasmania	Institute of TAFE Tasmania	14	Development of an assessors network across TAFE Tasmania
Victoria	National ITAB Workplace Communications Network	28	A group of Workplace Communications officers sharing and disseminating information about industry training
Victoria	RMIT	13	Faculty team leaders implementing National Training Packages
Victoria	ACPET*	6	Female CEOs of private provider Registered Training Organisations, addressing the National Training Framework for private providers
Western Australia	Professional and Career Development Unit – Dept of Training & Employment	80	Development of a WA Statewide Assessors and Workplace Training Network that will reinforce collaborative arrangements for the implementation of the National Training Framework

Table 2.1 (cont'd): Focus Areas of the 2001 Reframing the Future Communities of Practice

State/Territory	Coordinating Organisation	Participants	Focus area
Western Australia/national	Challenger Institute of TAFE	15	National Horticulture Providers' Network from TAFE Institute implementing the Horticulture Training Package
Western Australia	Eastern Pilbara College of TAFE	13	Network of Caravan Park owners and workers, Tourism representatives and VET providers working on the implementation of the Caravan Training Package
Western Australia	West Coast College of TAFE	25	Network of VET women leaders at West Coast College exploring how a Community of Practice could transform VET institutions to operate on a principle of equity and will improve the implementation of the National Training System

* The ACPET project was allowed additional time to finish, so references are not made to it in this report.

The above table, with its range of providers and breadth of topics associated with the implementation of the NTF, provides a reminder of the multiplicity of VET training organisations and the need for high levels of trust, sharing and communication within and between VET training providers and industries. In theory, Communities of Practice would seem to be one means for facilitating such trust, sharing and communication in a multi-dimensional educational sector.

The different types of communities

The 2001 Communities of Practice were deliberately chosen to provide a broad sample of communities. The National Project Director of Reframing the Future selected the sixteen Communities of Practice and invited them to participate, to ensure that there was a variety of types for evaluation purposes. Different types of communities represented in Table 2.1 above include:

1. Existing networks of practitioners, such as the National Horticulture Providers' Network, the Print and Graphics Arts Consortium, the WA Workplace Assessors' Network and NSW TAFE Staff Development managers
2. Groups that had never come together before in a structured manner, such as the participants in the Caravan Training Package group led by the Eastern Pilbara College of TAFE
3. Groups of practitioners within the one organisation, such as the Institute of TAFE Tasmania and RMIT groups
4. Groups from across one State, such as the Health Training Package group in Queensland
5. Groups from the TAFE, Private Provider and ACE domains
6. Groups from seven different States and Territories
7. A group with Indigenous members from the Barrier Reef Institute
8. Female-only groups in the West Coast College Equal Voices community and the CEOs of private provider Registered Training Organisations in Victoria
9. National groups, such as the National ITAB Workplace Communications Network and the Horticulture and Print and Graphic Arts groups mentioned above

10. An organisation with a national network of offices, Centrelink.

This breadth of different types of Communities of Practice provided extensive material for evaluation. The general success of the 2001 Communities, demonstrated during this report, suggests that Communities of Practice suit a multitude of VET settings.

Bottom-up, top-down, peer-level and partnership-based groups

Fontaine (2001) distinguishes between the way two different types of Communities of Practice are initiated, 'bottom-up' and 'top-down'. 'Bottom-up' communities often evolve from groups that start off meeting informally 'to explore their common passion' (p.19). Examples of such groups are the Horticulture Providers' Network and the female CEOs of private RTOs in Melbourne. 'Top-down' groups are deliberately created by the organisation, as 'a corporate initiative' (p.20). In the case of the Reframing the Future program in 2001, the Centrelink and RMIT groups fit this category.

Most of the 2001 Communities of Practice do not fit Fontaine's two categories of 'bottom-up' or 'top-down'. In most cases, the groups were coordinated by an RTO, but involved the voluntary participation of a range of partners, including industry. It may be more appropriate to describe these communities as peer-level or partnership-based Communities of Practice. Distinguishing features of peer-level Communities of Practice were that these groups consisted of equal peers in an organisation and the members were used to meeting on other matters, prior to the commencement of the Communities of Practice project. Examples of peer-level groups were the TAFE NSW Staff Development Managers' Network and the ACE NSW Metropolitan Managers' group. Distinguishing features of partnership-based Communities of Practice were that these groups consisted of a mix of VET providers and industry representatives who are encouraged within the national VET training system to form partnerships. Examples of partnership-based groups were the Murray Institute of TAFE Wine Industry project and the Eastern Pilbara Caravan Training Package group.

From an evaluation perspective, there was sufficient variety in the way the groups had formed to enable observation and analysis of such factors as voluntary participation versus compulsion and the special challenges posed by peer-level or partnership-based Communities of Practice. Evidence from the pilot projects suggests that voluntary membership is more likely to lead to positive outcomes than conscripting or cajoling personnel to join. Evidence also shows that peer-level or partnership-based Communities of Practice are very appropriate in VET as they encourage peers to share and partners to contribute to the common goal of a national training system.

Profile of the participants

The backgrounds of the participants in each of the sixteen Communities of Practice varied extensively, reflecting again the diversity of personnel involved in VET. The participants ranged from teaching and management personnel of RTOs to industry trainers and managers and were drawn from public and private RTOs and from schools and Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITABs). For instance, the WA Assessors' Network started with 35 members in March 2001, prior to the commencement of the Communities of Practice project in August 2001, and grew to 200 by November 2001. (For the purposes of the pilot project, 80 was taken as the average number during the period August-November 2001). A survey was administered by the coordinator to the WA Assessors' Network Community of Practice in August/September 2001 to gather data on membership and one of the variables was member profile. Based on a 42% response rate the following statistics emerged:

37% members are from Private RTOs, 24% TAFE, 20% Other, 7% Industry/Enterprise, 4% ITC, 4% School/University and 4% Group Training.

40% of members held combined position responsibilities, e.g. one person may be a manager,

facilitator and assessor, 18% were managers, 16% facilitators/assessors, 11% consultants, 11% other and 4% were assessors only.

Most respondents conduct assessments in a combination of environments. (WA Assessors' Network Community of Practice Final Report)

This range of participants was typical in many of the sixteen Communities of Practice. From observations and from interviewing the convenors or facilitators of communities, it would appear that communities flourish when the focus is agreed, e.g. assessment, while the diverse background of the participants often has minimal influence on the community's development. On the other hand, if the members see themselves as equals or peers, then this perception seems to benefit the community, as this sense of equality prevents the stratification commonly evident in bureaucratic organisations.

The numbers of participants in any one Community of Practice in 2001 varied from six to eighty. From observations, communities whose members are spread across multiple sites and whose total number of participants exceeds 20 often find it very challenging to cater for all their members.

Roles of core members

The Reframing the Future 'Proposal Form' for Communities of Practice in 2001 simply asked each proposer to nominate a convenor/facilitator. In a number of the 2001 Communities, the convenor engaged a specialist facilitator. Most often, the one person performed a number of roles beyond convening and facilitating, such as administrator and technologist, for example, setting up online forums.

During the period the 2001 pilot Communities of Practice were conducted, Fontaine (2001) drew attention to the importance of defining the roles that are needed to keep 'Communities of Practice afloat'. The Institute for Knowledge Management in Boston studied communities in 18 firms and identified 11 formal and informal community roles, as follows:

- Subject matter expert
- Core team member
- Community member
- Leader
- Sponsor
- Facilitator
- Content coordinator
- Journalist
- Mentor
- Administrator/events coordinator
- Technologist. (p.16)

Fontaine (2001) found that Communities of Practice don't depend on funding so much as the host or sponsoring organisation supporting the creation of clear roles. Fontaine (2001) also found that:

Clearly defined roles ensure a structure that allows a community to grow with a sense of vision.

Continuity of roles provides consistency and structure as the membership changes.

Roles reinforce the legitimacy and value of the community throughout the organisation. (p.17)

Fontaine's findings reinforce and extend observations made of the roles performed in the 2001 VET Communities of Practice. These observations include:

1. *Those communities that engaged a dedicated facilitator generally achieved more than those that did not*, although some energetic convenors were able to perform effectively the facilitator role. One benefit of engaging a facilitator in those groups where the convenor was the line manager of some or all the participants, was that the facilitator removed the sense of the activity being a bureaucratically-structured, 'top-down' activity.
2. *The 2001 communities may have achieved more if other roles had been defined beyond the roles of convenor and facilitator*. In establishing their project, the Equal Voices Community of Practice at West Coast College identified five roles: Project Director, Project Convenor, Project Manager, Project Facilitator and Project Administrator. Given this commitment to defining roles, it is interesting to note the breadth of activities and achievements of the Equal Voices community. Their many activities included workshops, one-on-one meetings, online forum (possibly the most effective online forum of all the sixteen 2001 projects), email communication, focus group discussions, a printed bulletin and an international guest lecturer. The achievements of the Equal Voices Community of Practice were extensive, ranging from providing members with a sense of empowerment, to providing multiple ways for interaction and networking, to mapping out the impact of the 12 AQTF Standards on their jobs and work areas, to documenting members' skills, talents and professional experience as the basis for developing a mentoring strategy.

As a result of the Fontaine (2001) research and in response to the findings from the 2001 VET projects, the 2002 Application Form asked proposers to identify personnel to perform specific roles within the community.

The internal structure of communities

In January 2002, after the completion of the 2001 project, three pillars in the field of Community of Practice research, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) released a major new text, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, which sets out, more clearly than before in the literature, the internal structure of Communities of Practice. This new model enables a re-appraisal of the 2001 Communities of Practice and provides valuable signposts for future VET Communities of Practice.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (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 member's 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)

These three elements provide future Communities of Practice with useful checklists for self-analysis and for guiding the growth of the community.

Applying these three elements to the 2001 Communities of Practice raises the following observations:

1. All the 2001 communities were clear about the broad domain for their projects: the implementation of the NTF. As Table 2.1 demonstrates, many of the communities focused appropriately on a narrow aspect of this broad domain.
2. All the 2001 communities created a sense of community as they understood the importance of fostering interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust.
3. However, not all the 2001 communities had enough time or resources in the tight period from August-December 2001 to fully explore and capture the components of practice: the set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that community members share. Future Communities of Practice may benefit from allocating sufficient human and other resources to capturing the ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that underpin their community.

Concluding comment

Communities of Practice are appropriate in a wide range of settings: for instance, they can involve members who have never collaborated before; or they can be based on an existing network of practitioners who wish to take their group to a new level of interaction and sharing. Communities flourish when the focus is agreed: for example, a focus on assessment in VET.

While Communities of Practice are versatile mechanisms for collaboration, they benefit from members' understanding their structure. Communities of Practice have structures based on concepts of domains of knowledge, community and practice. Communities also benefit from core members taking specific group roles such as the role of facilitator, subject matter expert or administrator.

How were the Communities of Practice fostered and cultivated?

This chapter compares theoretical benchmarks with how the sixteen VET Communities of Practice were fostered and cultivated during 2001.

Key points

1. In modelling the good practice principles advocated by the leading theorists, the convenors and facilitators of the VET Communities of Practice in 2001 collectively used a variety of strategies to foster and cultivate their communities. Individually, no one convenor or facilitator met all the benchmarks identified by the theorists, which is understandable due to the limited time available for the 2001 projects. Future VET convenors and facilitators of Communities of Practice will benefit from a close analysis of the benchmarks in the literature.
2. The actions of the 2001 VET convenors and facilitators that met benchmarks set out in the literature included focusing on topics important to both the business and community members; creating forums for thinking; catering for different levels of participation; developing public and private spaces; creating a rhythm; building relationships between members; combining familiarity and excitement; opening up a dialogue between insiders and outsiders; making it easy to contribute and access the community's knowledge and practice.
3. However, the VET facilitators surpassed the benchmarks set out in the literature in one respect: they employed a range of self-evaluation strategies to monitor their own community's progress, an activity surprisingly downplayed in the international literature on how to grow and sustain Communities of Practice.

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Theoretical benchmarks for fostering and cultivating communities

Although Communities of Practice are informal and self-organising, recent research (McDermott, 2000; Wenger and Snyder, 2000; Allee, 2000; Lesser and Everest, 2001) highlights a number of ways to make such communities more successful. For instance, Wenger and Snyder (2000) maintain that organisations need to provide sufficient encouragement and support for Communities of Practice to develop and be sustained over time. McDermott (2000) usefully identifies the following four key challenges in starting and supporting Communities of Practice:

1. The management challenge – to communicate that the organisation truly values sharing knowledge
2. The community challenge – to create real value for community members and ensure that the community shares cutting edge thinking
3. The technical challenge – to design human and information systems that not only make information available but also help community members think together

- The personal challenge – to be open to the ideas of others and maintain an enthusiasm for developing the community’s practice.

According to McDermott (2000), there are a number of steps necessary in order to meet these challenges, as set out below.

Table 3.1: McDermott’s Four Challenges for starting and supporting Communities of Practice (from McDermott, 2000)

Challenge	Steps to meet challenge
The management challenge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on topics important to both the business and community members Find a well-respected community member to coordinate the community Make sure people have time and encouragement to participate Build on the core values of the organisation
The community challenge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Get key thought leaders involved Create forums for thinking as well as systems for sharing information Build relationships between community members Develop an active core group
The technical challenge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Make it easy to contribute to and access the community’s knowledge and practices
The personal challenge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Create real dialogue about cutting edge issues

McDermott’s challenges are a valuable starting point for VET practitioners involved in the development and maintenance of Communities of Practice.

Although they recognise that each community is unique in the type of support it requires from the organisation, Lesser and Everest (2001) provide some general guidelines that can be applied in many situations:

- Focus resources on communities that have strategic implications for the organisation
- Provide the community with the time and space to interact
- Designate roles and responsibilities to support the community
- Market the community and its success stories.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) suggest seven principles for cultivating Communities of Practice:

- Design for evolution, so that the community can grow and change, for instance when new members bring new interests to the group
- Open a dialogue between the inside and outside perspective, with insiders providing deep understanding of the community issues and outsiders helping members to see wider possibilities
- Invite different levels of participation, allowing members to participate in ways that suit their level of interest
- Develop both public and private community spaces, so that all levels of relationships can flourish. Public spaces are meetings and using an online forum; private spaces are one-on-one encounters, either face-to-face or electronically.

5. Focus on value, because communities thrive when they deliver value to the organisation and to the members
6. Combine familiarity and excitement, satisfying members' needs for both comfort and divergent thinking
7. Create a rhythm for the community, through regular meetings, teleconferences, online interactions and informal events, mixing idea-sharing forums and tool-building projects. (pp.49-64).

The lack of distinct boundaries for a Community of Practice provides convenors and facilitators with special challenges. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) report that a number of studies have shown that the most important factor in a community's success is 'the vitality of the leadership' (p.80). They find that community coordinators perform a number of key functions:

1. Identify important issues in their domain
2. Plan and facilitate community events
3. Informally link community members
4. Foster the development of community members
5. Manage the boundary between the community and the formal organisation
6. Help build the practice, including the knowledge base, lessons learned, best practices, tools and methods
7. Assess the health of the community and evaluate its contributions to members and the organisation. (p.80)

The ideas of McDermott, Wenger, Snyder, Lesser and Everett and other theorists are helpful reference points in the following analysis of how the 2001 Communities of Practice were fostered and cultivated.

What strategies fostered and cultivated the 2001 VET Communities of Practice?

The discussion below shows that the convenors and facilitators of the various Communities of Practice in 2001 collectively used a variety of strategies that modelled the good practice principles advocated by the leading theorists. Individually, no one convenor or facilitator met all the benchmarks identified by the theorists, which is understandable due to the limited time available for the 2001 projects. Future VET convenors and facilitators of Communities of Practice will benefit from a close analysis of the benchmarks in the literature. The facilitators of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice exceeded the international benchmarks in one respect: their use of a range of evaluation strategies.

Focus on topics important to both the business and community members

McDermott (2000) recommends that communities focus on topics of immediate importance. The facilitator of the Institute of TAFE Tasmania community noted that the recent introduction of the Australian Quality Training Framework and the distribution of the ANTA Assessment Products 'sharpened the interest in assessment issues, which were the focus of the Community of Practice'. (ITT Final Report)

The Equal Voices West Coast College community made connections between the personal journeys of its members, the members' expertise and how this expertise could be documented and harnessed for individual and organisational benefit:

At one of the workshops, two members of the community shared their professional journeys (a three-month industry placement and the award of a Masters in Education and Training by distance learning) with the group. Their presentations led to a thought-provoking discussion

on the many and varied experiences of members and ways in which this expertise could be documented and harnessed for individual and organisational benefit. (Equal Voices West Coast College Final Report)

Create forums for thinking

Emulating the recommendation of McDermott (2000) that forums for thinking be created, one facilitator opened each meeting with a theoretical discussion and was surprised by the level of interest in the theory of Communities of Practice. She eventually had to curtail the discussion each time the group met:

In my original invitation to the health practitioners, I explained how the funding for the project was achieved. I began each face-to-face meeting with a thirty-minute session on the project outline and the theories underpinning Communities of Practice. I was surprised to find that most attendees had done their homework, and had read the booklet and the journal article that had been sent to the convenors. They were prepared for discussion, and I found that I had to curtail the discussion to progress to the other items on the agenda. (Qld Health Training Package Final Report)

Cater for different levels of participation

The facilitator of the ACE NSW Community of Practice understood three concepts suggested by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002)—inviting different levels of participation, allowing members to participate in ways that suit their level of interest and focusing on value:

Some members of the group look to the facilitator to provide expert input and do the follow up work. When required to do more than participate in the workshop a few individuals will withdraw from the face-to-face group because they are no longer getting “value” or simply do not have the time to give to the longer term community building. The group and facilitator recognise these issues and try to maintain contact which can in the long term see people contribute in other ways... people will come and go according to need and capacity...like an iceberg, motivation is complex with much of it under the surface. (ACE NSW Final Report)

The SA Public Service Community of Practice facilitators managed the tensions created by competition among members:

In groups some people do more work than others do. Working competitively and on one’s own is the more usual way. The Community of Practice provides (at the best of times) a completely opposite experience of working in a cooperative group. It is undeniable, however, that the group members did show some competitiveness at times, albeit they were able to resolve differences constructively. They also expressed their frustrations in subgroups, but were able to negotiate their different-meaning frameworks successfully. Thus putting into practice some of the theory. (SA Public Service Final Report)

Develop public and private spaces

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) suggest that Communities of Practice develop both public and private community spaces, so that all levels of relationships can flourish. This was demonstrated well by the facilitators of the Equal Voices Community of Practice at West Coast College who used public workshops, focus groups and an online forum balanced by private email contact with individuals and one-on-one meetings. The latter were very effective:

Project facilitators met with members individually to document the stories of their professional journeys and skills. In addition to the discovery of an amazing variety of skills and expertise, project facilitators were struck by members’ passion and enthusiasm for their work. Members who told their stories also remarked that the opportunities to share and celebrate our stories were few and far between. (Equal Voices West Coast College Final Report)

Create a rhythm

The facilitator of the National ITAB Workplace Communication Network understood the concept provided by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) that a rhythm be created for the Community of Practice. She created a rhythm through her detailed planning for each meeting:

Before a meeting: Planning meeting dates well in advance, circulating an agenda for input, asking for volunteers to host meetings, linking meetings with other valuable forums or conferences, using more than one form of meeting at a given time – i.e. face-to-face and teleconference and ensuring there was some food and drink (morning tea, lunch or finger foods and drinks) to encourage some social interaction after the meeting.

At the meeting: Initiating discussions and having some input but allowing others plenty of opportunity to have their say. Sometimes this included asking directed questions or asking a more passive participant for their opinion.

Taking notes (not as formal as minutes) for summaries that would be distributed to all members within the following fortnight.

After the meeting: Typing up the summaries and emailing to all network members (regardless of their input).

Sometimes, when a lot of information had to be distributed, this was better done by mail in hardcopy rather than by email – so photocopying and mail outs were included.

Phone calls and emailing network members about a range of issues often followed. (National ITAB Workplace Communication Network Final Report)

The ACE facilitator also used a mixture of strategies to create a rhythm for the community's learning. Firstly, an electronic network, via email, was used throughout the project as the primary source of communication to identify project participants, maintain communication processes, encourage shared information and debate across the group between meetings via email and phone and to complete Reframing the Future evaluation and final reports. Secondly, four full-day workshops were held, with the programs developed through negotiation at the end of each meeting and with follow up emails to confirm people's interest and attendance. Thirdly, between meetings the participants were encouraged to work independently or collaboratively to:

share issues raised through the project with management

conduct the preliminary AQTF checklist exercise

source policy and procedures on particular topics

develop draft evidence guides or lists for specific meetings

identify emerging priorities for implementation of the AQTF standards into 2002

reflect on the professional development issues as the VET managers with responsibility for managing these changes. (ACE NSW Final Report).

The National Horticulture Providers' Network intends to use teleconferences to maintain a tempo and to sustain gains made during the annual face-to-face meeting:

As these face-to-face meetings are an annual event, the momentum needs to be sustained during the rest of the year. The Horticulture Training Package and its review has provided the group with ample reason to communicate about common business and collaborative projects between colleges keep members in touch on a regular basis. Since the Perth meeting, we have

had two teleconferences, and both have helped keep everyone in the picture and given all an opportunity to contribute to the group. These teleconferences have been productive and easy for us all because all the participants now know each other. (National Horticulture Providers' Network Final Report)

Build relationships between members

McDermott (2000) identifies as one of the community challenges the need to build relationships between community members. In order to build relationships between the industry members and the providers in the Community of Practice, the facilitator of the Murray Institute Wine Industry project placed an emphasis on visits by VET staff to the industry premises, focusing the discussions on the on-job nature of the implementation strategies for the Laboratory Operations Training Package and conducting negotiations about delivery methodologies and assessment options.

When the facilitator of the National Horticulture Providers' Network gathered her group from around Australia for a three-day session in Perth, the emphasis was on building relationships, tabling expectations and encouraging sharing of experiences:

The most important strategies for this project were firstly to be extremely well organised, particularly for the face-to-face meeting. It was also important to have the group interacting comfortably together as quickly as possible, so they were asked to stay in the same hotel (corporate rates were arranged for them). A bus trip and picnic lunch were organised for their first day and this was the occasion that the concept of Communities of Practice was introduced to them. By the time the official meeting started, the group had formed friendships and were already cooperating.

The group was made aware of the commitments that were expected of the project, such as deadlines and reporting requirements. The facilitator organised and reminded participants by email of events such as teleconferences. The emails and teleconferences were also used to encourage participants to share their experiences, so that others might pick up on good ideas. (National Horticulture Providers' Network Final Report)

The facilitator of the Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry community used a face-to-face meeting to launch the community, but believes that videoconferencing will be a suitable environment once relationships are established:

The project commenced with a face-to-face meeting with the purpose of introducing participants to each other and to introduce the concept of a Community of Practice and the industry Training Package. Unfortunately this workshop was not well attended, for a number of reasons, however, even with a small group the benefits of a face-to-face meeting were clearly evident. For example, through a group brainstorming exercise the group successfully developed a comprehensive list of the skills and knowledge required to successfully operate a caravan park. This was a fairly significant exercise in that it provided an opportunity for participants to explore and articulate exactly what they do and the depth of knowledge required to do it.

Through this process participants also explored a wide range of issues relevant to the industry and their individual parks. There was a high degree of informal learning that was taking place and wasn't recognised by participants until they explored the concept of learning being an on-going process and also the significance of on the job training. The information sharing that takes place in face-to-face meetings has distinct advantages when relationships are in a developmental stage and new concepts are being explored.

Within this region there is enormous scope for the use of video-conferencing technologies, as a number of regional centres have access through telecentres or through the TAFE network. As with any new technology a phase-in period is required before individuals and communities accept it. For the people involved in this community, video conferencing is still

very confronting, however, a training program is available that familiarises participants with the hardware, the protocols and the use of cameras, which has had significant success in increasing individuals comfort in using this technology. As with any new technology the current cost is possibly prohibitive to individuals.

Internet communication through the use of email has been very significant in developing this community, however, again, in this region the 'take up' of this technology is not embraced by all due to the reasons previously identified as, low level of technology capitalisation, technical expertise of users, lack of technical support, and inconsistent power supply (generators in some areas) in some of the remote areas.

Combine familiarity and excitement

The facilitator of the WA Assessors' Network catered for both familiarity and excitement in her community. She catered for familiarity by arranging opportunities for the participants to communicate, documented progress and provided progress reports and information to members, provided feedback to individual members and supported the development of relationships. She generated excitement by marketing and championing the Community of Practice and including fun activities and inclusive activities that encouraged people working together as part of their meetings.

The National Horticulture Providers' Network used their face-to-face meeting to provide both structure and excitement for their community:

The one face-to-face meeting in Perth was critical for our Community of Practice. It gave everyone a chance to relax and open up with each other. The social activities provided the opportunity for participants to reach common, non-business ground and establish professional relationships.

The formal meeting allowed everyone to contribute from their diverse backgrounds and experience in the TAFE sector across Australia. Everyone gained from the richness of this diversity and the willingness of all to share and communicate openly. The face-to-face meeting provided the opportunity to workshop and brainstorm problems, that teleconference and email cannot provide. (National Horticulture Providers' Network Final Report)

The facilitator of the Barrier Reef Indigenous project stimulated divergent thinking by completing a silk painting at the community's first meeting:

I decided to do a silk painting, an abstraction of an aerial view of our region. The Community of Practice was to meet after we had a regional coordination meeting so I asked everyone to move their tables behind them and sit in a large circle. I lay the silk out across the floor and bunched it up in certain sections to represent contours of the land. When I opened the meeting I talked about the review and the fact that I felt they were asking for this approach given the problems that came to the surface in the review. I highlighted the fact that what we needed was to look at our identities if we were to share, trust and build on our roles in the Institute, but that also incorporated who we were as individuals.

I explained the significance of the painting as a symbol of our Community of Practice, reaching across a distributed area and that I wanted to bring out the fact that I was not only a teacher but that I liked to use art to express myself. My point was to show that we all have many qualities and parts of ourselves that we could share and tap into to improve our work practice in the centre. (Barrier Reef Final Report)

Open up a dialogue between insiders and outsiders

The convenor of the RMIT Community used a variety of facilitation strategies with the intention of providing enough structure and focus while also enabling open discussion and

reflection upon individual and group practice. In particular, she modelled the principle espoused by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) of opening up a dialogue between an inside and outside perspective, with insiders providing deep understanding of the community issues and outsiders helping members to see wider possibilities. Some of the many strategies she used were:

negotiating different roles/projects for community members to take up around a shared task

at all community meetings setting aside time to share experiences and learning, what might be happening for people and being prepared to let go of the agenda when the group had energy for something else

inviting managers to the last meeting to take part in the discussion around 'where to next'? ie, encouraged joint ownership and 'buy in'

inviting expertise external to the Community, eg, Quality Manager to talk through analysis of student satisfaction surveys and answer questions etc. (RMIT Final Report)

The Equal Voices West Coast College group invited an international guest speaker Dr. Rekha Pande, to address its members on women, leadership and globalisation issues at a lunch time seminar held at Joondalup campus on 28 November 2001. Dr. Pande, Professor of Social Studies at the University of Hyderabad, India, has been engaged in teaching and research for 23 years in gender issues related to equity, justice, health, violence and globalisation. She was visiting Perth on her return to India from an international women and globalisation conference hosted by the Australian National University in Canberra.

The SA Public Service Community of Practice agreed that the role of the community included the creation of 'a common body of knowledge whilst mindful that emic or insider knowledge may differ in all likelihood from etic or outsider knowledge'. (SA Public Service Final Report)

Make it easy to contribute and access the community's knowledge and practice

Every Community of Practice will have its own preferences for how communication and sharing occur. A skill of a facilitator is to know what mechanisms for communication and sharing that the community will prefer. In the following account, the facilitator notes the value of each different communication medium:

Both initial meetings were face-to-face. I believe that trust and collaboration develop more quickly in this type of setting. After we had convened these meetings, the two groups came together via videoconference and teleconference combined. The videoconference seemed to continue from where the others had finished. All of the participants were prepared to pick up where they had left off, and to get on with the agenda. Communication prior to the meetings is usually via email, and minutes will be posted to an additional part of this unit's website that is accessed by the TAFE Queensland system. (Qld Health Training Package group Final Report)

In the case of the Wine Industry Community of Practice in the Riverland of South Australia, the convenor judged that the group was too fragile and under-developed to use other than face-to-face interaction:

Face-to-face communication was by far the most effective. That may be a comment on the stage of the group or the type of project. These discussions were about the implementation issues for a new Training Package and the industry needed to see how the package would in fact be useful to them. It is envisaged that next year when the training begins the use of teleconferencing and email will also be an effective means of communicating with the group.

Email is particularly useful in communicating with supervisors but some other employees do not have access to email in the workplace. These issues will need to be taken into account when planning a communication strategy. (Murray Institute Wine Industry Final Report)

The WA Assessors' Network of assessors used a variety of communication media to provide access to the community's knowledge base:

Teleconferencing was used a number of times between the Community of Practice convener and the Kimberley and the Pilbara Community of Practice to share information when those regional Communities of Practice were meeting face-to-face.

The WebCT site was set up, however was not particularly successful for a number of reasons, for example many people found the log-in off putting, others found the site too slow, others simply didn't have time to navigate around and contribute to an online discussion.

Email was the medium used most effectively.

A nominated convener was available to field phone calls and to provide immediate response to enquiries. (WA Assessors' Network Final Report)

During the 2001 Communities of Practice sub-program, Reframing the Future provided groups with the opportunity to use a platform for online forums. Only one group used this platform extensively. The following description was typical of the experiences of most Communities of Practice:

Most of the contributions were made at face-to-face meetings or at some joint teleconferencing. Once people had met each other it was much easier to communicate by phone or by email. Our group did not use the Reframing the Future online forum due to a lack of time in working out how to use it properly. We have planned to have some professional development as a group, to learn how to use it and to make it a home for our Community of Practice in cyberspace where all can have input and can access information. (National ITAB Workplace Communication Network Final Report)

Reciprocal teaching is the term used by the facilitator of the Barrier Reef Indigenous Community of Practice to describe the ways in which ideas were shared at their monthly meetings:

If knowledge is to be open, collaborative and distributed then devices need to be applied so that we demonstrate participation. Every month the Community of Practice would meet. Each campus was invited to talk about how they were going, what projects were underway and what issues may have arisen since the previous meeting. The group were then invited to respond. Brown and Palinscar would describe this as reciprocal teaching where people are encouraged to openly display and share their knowledge for the benefit of the group and the system as a whole (Brown, A. L. Palinscar, A.S, 1989) whilst Aronson (1978) would call it the 'jigsaw method of cooperative learning'. This is where each team or member is expert on only one part of the whole and no team is expert on the whole. But each team/member distributes knowledge to the whole. There is in fact no single leader, but each member plays the role of researcher, student and teacher in different configurations and contexts. (Aronson 1978) (Barrier Reef Indigenous Community of Practice Final Report)

Evaluate progress

The facilitators of the various Communities of Practice strongly endorsed the use of a range of evaluation strategies, which is a surprising omission from the earlier discussion of the international literature on how to grow and sustain Communities of Practice. The benefits of evaluation were seen by the facilitator of the Institute of TAFE Tasmania as:

identifying and focussing on the shared expertise and needs of the group

guiding the facilitator's planning

indicating the learning which occurred as a result of the Community of Practice. (Institute of TAFE Tasmania Final Report)

The NSW Staff Development Managers' Network convenor used a range of strategies to check on progress:

Structured reflection at the end of the sessions

Group evaluation determined the value of sessions undertaken and planned future activities.

Individually, some members used learning journals, which enabled them to evaluate the process personally.

Participation was an indicator for me as the convenor. Because attendance varied, we probably should have organised dates further in advance. (NSW Staff Development Managers' Network Final Report)

Due to the fragile nature of her community, the facilitator of the Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry predominantly used qualitative methodologies to evaluate the progress of her community:

For the very early stage this community has reached, the evaluation strategies that have been most helpful have been questioning, listening and reflecting. It has been essential to determine how receptive individual participants have been to new concepts and how to introduce those concepts whilst taking into account their educational, professional and social backgrounds. This has required a high degree of sensitivity as for most small business operators time is at a premium. It is often a challenge to get participants from this demographic group to commit to activities that have intangible and long term benefits as opposed to more immediate tangible benefits such as increased patronage and profits.

More formal evaluation tools have not been employed as the community is still in very formative stages. (Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry Final Report)

The facilitator of the WA Assessors' Network was clear about the value of both formative and summative evaluation strategies:

Evaluation is not something that should just happen at the end of a program, rather an ongoing process that supports continuous improvement at critical points. Formative and summative evaluation strategies were employed throughout the project time frame.

One strategy was the development, implementation and analysis of a questionnaire to members of the Community of Practice. This tool was useful in that it provided a membership profile that identified target audience experience, qualifications, work environment etc. It produced data on what members wanted, where they identified their professional development needs etc. (WA Assessors' Network Final Report)

A similar evaluative approach was used by RMIT:

Evaluation included both formative and summative strategies. Ongoing discussion during network meetings provided an informal sharing of experience and 'snap shots' of the learning. The purpose of our final meeting was to debrief the experience and then look at potential activity or 'joint enterprise' for 2002. This is still being framed and in the process will look at how we might enhance or build upon the Community of Practice model beyond the life of this project. (RMIT Final Report)

The National Horticulture Providers' Network used a range of tools:

The evaluation strategies used were pre and post assessment surveys and observation and questioning. The surveys were very straightforward for participants to use and resulted in many thoughtful comments from the group.

The more difficult evaluation was of change in attitudes about the participants' perception of themselves and of the nature of their Community of Practice. This was done by observation, questioning and careful listening. (National Horticulture Providers' Network Final Report)

Evaluation sometimes shows that the various members of the Community of Practice are at different points of development:

Asking people to identify what it is that they want is one thing but getting the full picture of how 35 people perceive the development of the Community of Practice is another. The 10 responses received to the questionnaire are indicative of the dots on the continuum. Everyone is everywhere! That's OK for now, as long as they are on the line somewhere.

On a brighter note, positive comments and possibilities are beginning to be explored. People are coming out of the woods and are supporting each other. And for me I have taken my protective armour off and feeling more positive vibes from staff. From a management point of view, I have been given the nod to proceed with the Community of Practice. (Barrier Reef Final Report)

Evaluation sometimes opens up issues that will need to be addressed in future. The SA Public Service Human Resources group felt that they needed to undertake a cost benefit analysis of their project, but is aware that unintended results may emerge in the future, that will need to be valued.

Final comment

Fostering and cultivating Communities of Practice are complex challenges, but theorists have identified practical steps that convenors and facilitators can use. For instance, McDermott (2000) identifies four sets of challenges and how they can be met through facilitation. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) provide seven principles for cultivating communities and they underline the importance of community leadership.

The convenors and facilitators of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice were outstanding in their use of evaluation strategies to monitor the progress of their communities. In this one regard, the VET professionals exceeded the benchmarks for fostering and cultivating communities of practice identified in the international literature. Evaluation is surprisingly given a low or no profile by most theorists.

What stages did the Communities of Practice move through?

Although every group of people will develop at its own pace and experience its own rhythm and dramas, over a period of time all groups move through stages from infancy to adolescence and maturity and sometimes death. This chapter compares the theory about the stages of community development with the stages that the VET Communities of Practice moved through, during the period August-December 2001.

Key points

Key points in this chapter include:

1. Communities of Practice almost never progress simultaneously from one stage to the next, across the five consecutive stages of development identified by the theorists. After four months of activity, almost all of the sixteen VET project convenors or facilitators in 2001 considered their whole group or most of their group had progressed to either the second or third stage ('coalescing' or 'active': terms defined below); one felt they were still in the initial, 'potential' stage; and none felt they had progressed to stage four, 'dispersed'. Additionally, within each community, different members progressed at different rates.
2. Theorists have identified many concrete steps that can be taken by convenors and facilitators of Communities of Practice, to assist community development. Convenors and facilitators of the 2001 VET communities modelled an understanding of many of these steps, but could benefit from noting new literature that crystallises facilitation strategies.
3. Facilitators of multi-organisational and multi-campus Communities of Practice in VET especially need to be aware of the theory about stages of development, but also need to be multi-skilled group facilitators, highly-knowledgeable about contextual factors affecting their group members and very resilient in the face of complex group behaviours. Most of the facilitators of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice demonstrated such skill, knowledge and resilience.
4. The facilitator's role in a Community of Practice includes discussion, theorising, conceptualisation, explanation, guidance, negotiation and persuasion. For instance, facilitators need to continually engage with community members about the value of their community and, implicitly, the members' understanding of the concept of Community of Practice. This engagement was a strong characteristic of the facilitation of the 2001 VET communities.

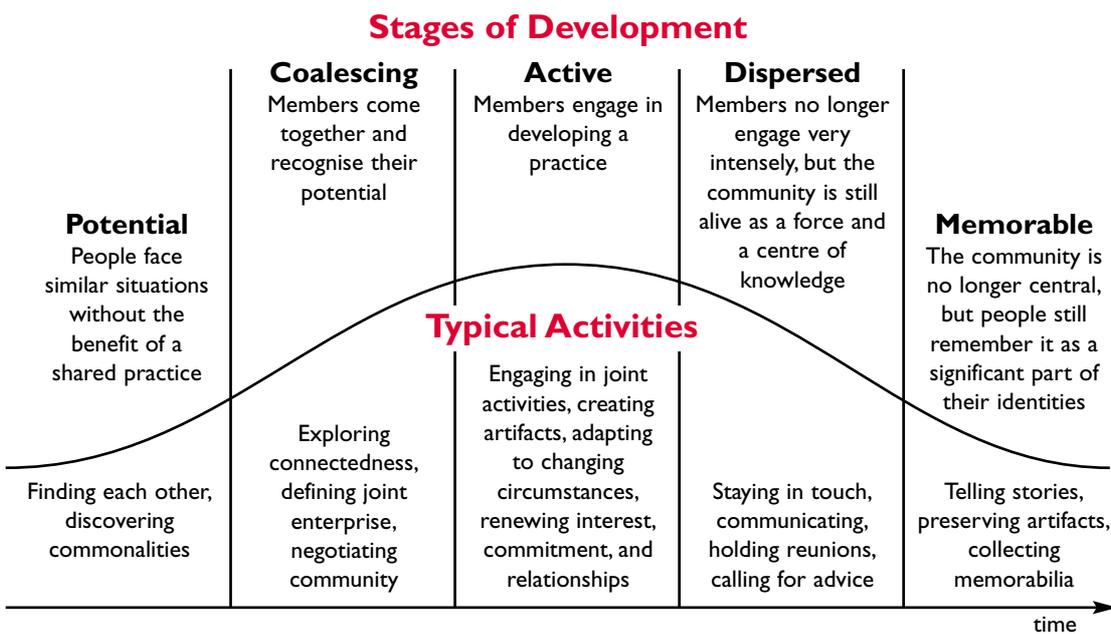
Theoretical stages of development

Communities of Practice are continually evolving and changing. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) believe that communities move through stages that they call potential,

coalescing, maturing, stewardship and transformation. (p.68). At each stage of development, different actions are required to maintain the group and help it move to the next stage. Ideally, facilitators of VET Communities of Practice will be alert to the characteristics of each stage, so they can identify the stage reached by their community and provide support to suit the occasion.

Wenger (1998b) proposes five stages of development that differ slightly from the five categories listed above. In the following diagram he sets out five stages of potential, coalescing, active, dispersed and memorable, where each stage is characterised by different levels of interaction among the members and different kinds of activities.

Diagram 4.1: Stages of development of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998b)



These stages of development set Communities of Practice apart from other types of organisational forms and structures, such as work groups or project teams. While all groups that meet on a regular basis move through Tuckman’s famous pattern of forming, storming, norming and performing, Communities of Practice have their own growth characteristics. According to Lesser and Everest (2001), Communities of Practice differ from other kinds of groups found in organisations in three ways—in the way they define their enterprise, exist over time and set their boundaries:

Being primarily informal, the membership of these communities often fluctuates, in terms of both the number of participants and the level of intensity with which people partake in community activities. Communities tend to emerge from existing networks of individuals, often crossing traditional organisational boundaries (p. 38).

In addition, Lesser and Everest (2001) maintain that communities tend not to have direct responsibility for the production of a specific deliverable within a given time span, as a typical project team would:

Rather, the community tends to set its own agenda over its lifespan, continually defining itself by the needs of its members. Communities typically take part in a number of formal and informal activities, ranging from education sessions and conferences to day-to-day interaction designed to solve specific work problems (p. 38).

This tendency for Communities of Practice to continually define itself by the needs of the members means that the communities are constantly changing, providing ongoing challenges to convenors.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) suggest a range of concrete strategies that convenors can use at each stage of development. For instance, in the Potential Stage, the convenor can promote the community's development by defining the community's focus, normally after observing any emerging ideas and attitudes among possible group members, identifying and building relationships between members, and identifying topics and projects that would be exciting for community members. Set out in Table 4.1 below is a summary of the steps in typical work plans that convenors can take at each of the first three stages of development of Communities of Practice, based on the research of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002).

Table 4.1: Typical Work Plans for convenors in each of the first three stages of development of Communities of Practice (from Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002)

Potential Stage	Coalescing Stage	Maturing Stage
Determine the primary intent of the community	Build a case for membership	Identify gaps in knowledge and develop a learning agenda
Define the domain and identify engaging issues	Launch the community	Define the community's role in the organisation
Build a case for action	Initiate community events and spaces	Redefine community boundaries
Identify potential coordinators and thought leaders	Legitimise community coordinators	Routinise entry requirements and processes
Interview potential members	Build connections between core members	Measure the value of the community
Connect community members	Find the ideas, insights and practices that are worth sharing	Maintain a cutting-edge focus
Create a preliminary design for the community	Document judiciously	Build and organise a knowledge repository
	Identify opportunities to provide value	
	Engage managers	

The progress of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice will now be evaluated in terms of the concepts provided by the theorists cited above.

Stages reached by the 2001 VET Communities of Practice

The following discussion shows that Communities of Practice almost never pass smoothly from one stage to the next, across the five stages identified by Wenger (1998b) and Wenger et al (2002). Interviews were conducted with the convenors and facilitators of the sixteen Communities of Practice at the commencement, at the half-way point of the project and at the conclusion. The question about stages of development was asked explicitly at the half-way mark and was the subject of group discussion at the final Forum. In summary, almost all of the sixteen project convenors considered their whole group or most of their group had progressed to either the second or third stage (coalescing or active); one felt they were still in the initial, potential stage; and none felt they had progressed to stage four.

These findings are not surprising given the time constraint on the 2001 communities: they mostly formed in late August or early September 2001 and held final meetings in late November or early December 2001, with a few finishing later. The other reason it is not surprising that most of the communities did not progress beyond stage three is the complexity of the communities involved. Many of the Communities of Practice analysed in the literature come from the one company, e.g. IBM or the World Bank. Almost all of the Communities of Practice in the 2001 Reframing the Future sub-program involved multiple organisations from two spheres—education and industry—and partnerships based on shared

goals. Managing this diversity of participants tested the skills of the coordinators and facilitators.

During the Reframing the Future Communities of Practice sub-program in 2001, each coordinator was asked to assess what stage of development their Community of Practice had reached by the mid-way point, which was around October 2001. In their self-analysis, the coordinators were asked to use the five stages identified by Wenger (1998b) of potential, coalescing, active, dispersed and memorable. The written response by the facilitator of the ACE NSW VET Metropolitan Managers' community is interesting, as she asked the individual members of the group to assist her to develop a collective response to the question, What stage of development has your Community of Practice reached (e.g. potential, coalescing, active)? Their collective response commenced with these comments:

Our group considered these questions at our third meeting - in October and just over halfway through the project. By that time 5 people had withdrawn from the project for various reasons and so our collective response is from those with a commitment to continue.

We can't be pigeon-holed into one stage because of our history as an existing network.

At one level, we reached and stayed at the 'active' level with a core of the project participants active for the whole time.

But at another level, newer players and the 'old guard' were at either the 'coalescing' and dispersed stage or even a 'distanced' stage. (ACE NSW Final Report)

The members of the ACE community described themselves, at the mid-point of their project, in terms of Wenger's (1998b) categories, as follows.

Table 4.2: Self-analysis of their stage of development at the mid-point of their 2001 project by ACE NSW Community of Practice (ACE Mid-Term Report)

Stage of Development	Self-analysis
Coalescing	Some of our members are new to their roles and have been actively recruited to this project. They come along to explore possibilities and gauge the value of the exercise against competing priorities in a new job
Active	Some of our members have long established informal networks. They are committed to this project as a way of growing, adding depth to the network and getting genuine collaborative exercises across RTOs in place. Open, willing to share, willing to mentor newer members.
Active but dispersed	Part of the established network. Come and go depending on areas under discussion. Less committed to supporting new members as mentors within a collective group. May take what they want then reduce face-to-face commitment. Stay in touch by email.
Arms length, not active individuals I call this 'distanced'	Choose to not participate in the networking but stay in touch with the facilitator or other individuals by email and phone. Want the products of the projects to apply at their workplace. Not 'community' minded players or personality issues within the group keep them away. Or not adequately resourced by management to attend. Are they 'virtual participants' – Possibly Yes.

Mirroring the types of strategies advocated by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) in Table 4.2 above, the facilitator of the NSW ACE Community of Practice used a range of strategies to maintain cohesion during the developmental stages of the ACE project. In answer to the question *What activities and strategies have helped your Community of Practice reach its current stage?* she replied:

Email and phone to keep up individual interest and maintain project work goals.

Set dates for face-to-face meetings well in advance to fit with organisational issues such as school holidays and print deadlines.

Flexibility with programming of topics for each new meeting, given shifts in priorities for participants. But keeping within our themes.

Refocusing discussion with group on the concept of a 'Community of Practice' whereby the lead is set by the group, not the facilitator.

Follow up by the facilitator to reassure individuals of their capacity to contribute and expert VET input and resources, websites etc.

An open discussion of the 'Community of Practice' model and how that will fit with future projects of the group and the self-managing model. (ACE NSW Final Report)

The ACE facilitator also addressed the question, *What hurdles will your Community of Practice need to overcome to move to the next stage?* and again used concepts advocated by McDermott (2002):

Meeting the model's (McDermott's) technical and personal challenges.

This is not a linear progression as you can see from my previous answers. Within this project, we will try to ensure that the core of active participants see value from the project. It is not possible to meet the needs of all people in these projects. There will always be non-participants who choose to work differently.

The facilitator will communicate with other less active members to ensure the products are circulated to the wider network and that any sense of isolation or disappointment is addressed.

Finally, it must be remembered that management priorities sometimes change within a project time frame and individual commitment sways, as competing demands become an issue back in the workplace.

We can recognise such hurdles but may not have the capacity to overcome the barriers to move to a next stage especially within such a concentrated period of time.

Give us 12 months and we can really address these issues. (ACE NSW Final Report)

In the above account, the ACE facilitator models good practice in being aware of the theory of stages of development, but is intimately aware of the way different individuals develop in different ways within the ACE community.

The facilitator of the Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry community found that her group was not ready to be self-driven, so she altered her approach to enable her group to move through to more mature stages of development:

In the initial stages of the project participants were provided with Training Package and Communities of Practice literature with the intention of developing a self driven community that would develop and have a high level of ownership of the training that could be provided to industry in this region. On reflection, this may have been very confronting for participants and this could be attributed to a lack of a training culture within the industry and the very immature stage in development of the Community.

To overcome this, it was necessary for the facilitator to take on a coordination role, which is outside of the true scope of a Community of Practice, however, this role should diminish over time. It is envisaged the Community of Practice would serve as the building block for a more formal network of caravan park operators that could be formed on the strength of the Community, for the purpose of maximising group marketing opportunities and to implement industry standards. This formal network would play an important role in maintaining the less structured and less formal Community of Practice. (Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry Final Report)

The facilitator of the Barrier Reef Community of Practice also believed that her community developed in multiple ways and reached many different stages. At the mid-point of her project she commented: "One could describe this as a period of 'fluctuation'." Her analysis of the community's progress after two months, by October 2001, was as follows:

There have been pockets of people getting together to recognise their own potential. One example of this is a group of teachers in one location who have been meeting to look at delivery issues. They have nominated a facilitator and have identified that they are operating more a Community of Practice *within* the Community of Practice. This has not been without trouble. Already some people in the location feel that they are being excluded. This is because the focus is on delivery. The larger group have suggested that attendance be optional for administration staff and that minutes are taken and distributed to everyone. In many aspects I see this sub Community of Practice sitting between what Wenger (1998b) describes as a Potential stage of development and Coalescing/Active. The problem with the community is that it is not yet whole and may lead to some difficulties because of the positioning of its participants. (i.e. Third lesson: be aware of small fires starting behind your back) (Barrier Reef Final Report)

The complex challenges faced by the facilitator of the Barrier Reef Community of Practice mean she needs to draw on a range of her professional skills to help the community stay together, making the straight-forward lists of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) seem too linear. Facilitators of multi-organisational and multi-campus Communities of Practice in VET especially need to be aware of the theory about stages of development, but also need to be multi-skilled group facilitators, highly-knowledgeable about contextual factors affecting their group members and very resilient in the face of complex behaviours. The ACE and Barrier Reef facilitators and many of the other facilitators of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice demonstrated such skill, knowledge and resilience.

Theorists such as Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) recently have identified many concrete steps that can be taken by convenors and facilitators of Communities of Practice, to assist community development. Convenors and facilitators of the 2001 VET communities modelled an understanding of many of these steps, but could benefit from investigating the new literature.

Changes in the understanding of the concept Community of Practice

One of the recurring themes in the literature (e.g. Wenger, 1998b, and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002) is the need for facilitators to continually engage with community members about the value of their community and, implicitly, the members' understanding of the concept of Community of Practice. For instance, in the Potential Stage of a community's development, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) advise the facilitator to determine the primary intent of the community, define the domain and identify engaging issues and build a case for action. In the Coalescing Stage, they recommend that the facilitator build a case for membership and in the Maturing Stage they recommend that the facilitator identify gaps in knowledge and develop a learning agenda. In summary, the facilitator's role in a Community of Practice includes discussion, theorising, conceptualisation, explanation, guidance, negotiation and persuasion.

Following are examples of the VET facilitators modelling these skills. For instance, the convenor of the NSW TAFE Staff Development network found that the group moved from

'non-awareness to immersion' in the concept of Communities of Practice, where 'ongoing discussion resolved issues of communication, stages of development in Communities of Practice and emphasis on individual and group learning.' This movement from non-awareness to understanding was reported by a number of other facilitators:

Members' understanding has evolved from a position of lack of familiarity with the term 'Community of Practice' to one of clarity regarding the conceptual framework. Some members recognised that the professional associations they belonged to were in fact Communities of Practice. (Equal Voices West Coast College Community, Final Report)

The term for most people has a range of connotations. Community suggests a sense of belonging, strength and having something in common with others. Practice suggests a field of study or opportunity to try something and get better at it. Although the Community of Practice was named 'assessment and workplace training network' it held a lot more depth in learning for members than a superficial level expected from a network. (WA Assessors' Network Final Report)

From the commencement of this project, the concept of a self-managing Community of Practice was emphasised by the facilitator. By the end of the project, the group had embraced the concept and language of action learning and the Community of Practice model and expressed their desire to work together in such a model beyond the project. This model fits relatively comfortably within the ACE sector which values the principles of cooperation, collaboration, and a community development approach to adult learning. But it is nonetheless a challenge to turn the rhetoric into a reality. (ACE NSW Final Report)

Facilitators used their judgement on when and how frequently to discuss interpretations of the concept of Community of Practice:

I resisted giving members too much information at the beginning about Communities of Practice, choosing only to give people a general overview. As the work evolved members started to see themselves as belonging to two different communities – the larger group (Curriculum Network) and then local communities of practitioners they had set up and started to work within their departments. The group is now starting to think of themselves as a 'Community of Residents' whereby their learning is stimulated and shared in the Curriculum Network, with the knowledge and expertise being spread in the resident departments. (RMIT Final Report)

Another facilitator gave her members time to develop their own definitions of Communities of Practice:

Most participants did not want to focus on the concept of Community of Practice. Rather, they wanted to develop their knowledge about assessment. However some of the evaluative comments of participants provide some insights. For example, they valued:

"hearing others' views",

"connecting with the rest of the organisation",

"variety of perspectives",

"discussions about workplace problems",

"sharing knowledge",

"updating knowledge",

"staff interaction",

"invaluable sharing of experience with colleagues",

"new views and information",

"clarification",

"networking with practitioners from around the state",

"informative and humorous",

"getting some discussion going about applications",

"will assist in ensuring good practise",

"involve workplace experts",

"discovering what I need to learn". (Institute TAFE Tasmania Final Report)

Facilitators regularly reported a change in attitude among the community members, over time:

At first members came to it with more of a 'project' focus – i.e. outcomes, but as time progressed we all recognised the enormous amount of learning that was taking place – individually and as a group, and we stopped focussing on outcomes to consider the process. The fact that there were new members coming on board all the time, members who didn't have expertise in this area and those who had a wealth of knowledge in this area, made for an interactive and dynamic learning environment. (National ITAB Workplace Communication Network, Final Report)

Initially there was little if any understanding of the term. After the initial meeting and the presentation by John Mitchell the term was familiar and most participants understood the nature of a Community of Practice. John's presentation was reinforced by readings and the presentation of a comprehensive PowerPoint presentation at the second face-to-face meeting. By the end of the project the participants had a thorough understanding of Communities of Practice. It should be noted the majority of discussions related to the differences/similarities between Communities of Practice and the OnFX network. (Print and Graphic Arts Final Report)

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44 Some groups distinguished between networks and Communities of Practice and clarified that they wanted to be more than a network:

At the start of the project the participants saw themselves as a network that got together once a year, participated in teleconferences and generally helped each other out when they could. No one had given too much thought about the diverse occupations of the participants, the commitment and passion required, and the trust and sharing that was a feature of our group. This changed at the face-to-face meeting when we learnt what a Community of Practice was, and that we were one. (National Horticulture Providers' Network Final Report)

Two facilitators questioned whether the community's members did change their understanding of the concept of Communities of Practice during the project, as the lack of time in the 2001 projects militated against it.

I'm not sure that it did. The project timeframe was very short and the amount of work involved in the formulating of implementation strategies for a new Training Package is huge. Discussions of the concept 'Community of Practice' were minimal and I believe that this concept will be given a greater focus next year as the actual implementation occurs and the group is encouraged to gel more as a group. (Murray Institute Wine Industry Final Report)

Unfortunately, I don't believe our Community has a strong understanding of the term Community of Practice. Most of the people involved in this project are very pragmatic, busy, small business operators, interested in "tangibles". In order to develop this group of people, the term "Network" has been more widely used, however, the characteristics of a Community have been outlined and reinforced. I believe the concept of a Community of Practice will not be widely embraced or understood until the Community reaches further stages of development. (Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry Final Report)

Another convenor found that it took direct intervention of a new facilitator before members saw the difference between a network and a Community of Practice:

The change (in understanding of the concept of Community of Practice) was considerable but I feel the level of engagement in the concept is still to be fully developed. At the start Community of Practice was considered another term for a network. It took direct intervention to get participants to see the Community of Practice as a broader concept. I still feel we need to offer opportunities to the members to further explore this broader concept. In 2001 there would be benefit in an external facilitator talking to the group about this concept. (Centrelink Final Report)

Concluding comment

Communities of Practice are difficult to coordinate and facilitate, as the community needs to be open to the changing needs of the participants. However, convenors and facilitators need to persevere, as community members will benefit if the community progresses from its initial stage to more challenging stages such as the 'active' stage (Wenger, 1998b) where members engage in developing a 'practice'.

The convenors and facilitators of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice were not a representative group: they are possibly among the most skilled group workers in VET. The skills they demonstrated provide benchmarks for subsequent communities in VET.

What challenges did the Communities of Practice respond to?

This chapter compares the major challenges facing Communities of Practice – as identified in the international literature – with the challenges for the 2001 VET Communities of Practice.

Key points

The key points made in this chapter include the following:

1. International observers have identified a range of challenges that Communities of Practice can face, including being marginal to the organisation, forming factions or cliques, being too dependent on core members and being too large or dispersed.
2. The 2001 VET Communities of Practice experienced a number of the challenges found in the literature, such as communities being seen as marginal or lacking legitimacy or management support; some members being too dependent on the facilitator; some members being dogmatic and refusing to change from their previous networking conventions; and members leaving the community liable to suffer from ‘amnesia’ by not documenting processes.
3. The 2001 VET Communities of Practice experienced other challenges that are unique to VET and extend the range of challenges identified in the literature, such as managing members in the one community who are business competitors; managing communities in the period before a final version of a Training Package is released; and managing members from over twenty different VET industry advisory organisations.

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Challenges cited in the literature

Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) note that Communities of Practice are not havens of peace or unbounded goodwill: communities reflect all the strengths, weaknesses and complex interrelationships of their human members. (p.144). Drawing on their extensive experience, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) cite a raft of challenges that Communities of Practice can face:

- Imperialism. Community members who are experts in their field can become self-righteous and arrogant about their knowledge, even becoming narcissistic ‘knowledge police’. (p.142)
- Marginalisation. Some community members fail to assert the legitimacy of their community. Other community members are comfortable being marginal to the organisation and enjoy sharing their discontent, instead of being effective within the organisation. (p.143)
- Factionalism. Factions within communities can consume the energies of the members. (p.143)

- Cliques. Communities of Practice can become exclusive, degenerating into cliques. (p.145)
- Egalitarianism. It is disadvantageous if a community constrains individual growth or creativity through the power of a group norm of equality. (p.145)
- Dependence. Too much dependence on the activities of a coordinator or the charisma of a leader makes the community vulnerable to their departure. (p.146)
- Stratification. Too much psychological distance between the core group of members and the other participants creates distinct classes of members. (p.146)
- Disconnectedness. When a community is too large, diffused or dispersed to actively engage members, the sense of identification remains very superficial. (p.146)
- Localism. Sometimes a community lets geographical, departmental or company boundaries define its borders. (p.146)

Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) note other problems that communities might face: an over-focus on documenting ideas and procedures (documentism, p.147); or the opposite, that is, not documenting any insights (amnesia, p.148); refusing to accommodate any variations to established methods (dogmatism, p.148); and settling for second best (mediocrity, p.148).

In response to the above challenges, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) recommend a number of strategies:

- Make enough time for members to participate actively
- Balance joint activities with the production of artefacts
- Initiate exciting knowledge-development projects
- Benchmark the practice of other competitors
- Challenge members to help other teams with leading edge issues
- Value members' participation by allowing their contributions to build their reputations and affect their positions in the organisation
- Welcome the fresh ideas and agendas of a new generation of members. (pp.149-150)

In the next section, the types of problems that can be experienced in Communities of Practice will be compared with the challenges and responses of the Communities of Practice in the Reframing the Future sub-program in 2001. The insightful list of challenges provided in the literature, such as marginalisation, factionalism, disconnectedness and documentism (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002), are valuable reference points for future VET groups managing Communities of Practice.

What major challenges did the 2001 VET Communities of Practice face?

The following discussion shows that the 2001 VET Communities of Practice faced numerous challenges that extend the list provided in the international literature. Managing staff development and organisational development in VET is complex, particularly when multiple organisations are involved in the staff development projects and when a mix of training providers and industry is involved. Creating and sustaining collaborative, non-bureaucratic Communities of Practice based on common interests and sharing—that is, working outside of the normal power structures of VET such as institutional line management—is a testing terrain.

Although the composition of the membership of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice in 2001 was diverse, many of the communities experienced similar challenges, such as:

- The lack of time (four months) to develop a sense of community

- The geographical distance between members, sometimes from one side of Australia to the other
- The limited resources to bring together a large number of staff from other organisations.
- Some community members' lack of knowledge of Communities of Practice
- The lack of legitimacy of community development compared to a 'formal' or structured training program.
- Balancing the needs of members and their organisations.

Connecting with industry

The Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry project is a quintessential VET case study from a remote region of Australia, given the massive challenges it faced. Quintessential because the project faced all the problems just listed, such as geographical distance between members, as well as a number of the challenges cited in the literature, such as 'disconnectedness'. Quintessential also because the project addressed a core issue facing many contemporary VET training providers: how to connect with an industry affected by seasonal fluctuations in business, where there are very small numbers of local businesses in the industry, the industry operators do not have a history of collaboration with their industry colleagues but do have a history of competition and the local industry does not have a training culture. Implementing a national training system in this context takes a highly-skilled VET professional.

Figure 5.1: Challenges faced by the Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry (Final Report)

There were significant challenges in developing this Community of Practice that have resulted in a very different project to the initial project proposal. The initial proposal aimed to achieve the following outcomes:

- A. Identification of skills, knowledge and understanding required for the operation of caravan parks in the context of the Pilbara and Kimberley
- B. Establishing links between Industry requirements and the Caravan Industry Training Package qualifications
- C. Developing a range of appropriate, valid and relevant learning and assessment tasks for identified competencies
- D. Developing a course schedule customised for delivery in the north west of Western Australia
- E. Identifying a range of delivery options
- F. Establishing a network amongst industry to promote business within the Pilbara and Kimberley
- G. Developing a model for developing a Community of Practice, which can be used by other training organisations.

In commencing this project it became apparent that there were significant challenges in establishing the community let alone developing a training schedule. The project is on the way to achieving all of the above with the exceptions of C, D and G. The major challenges for this project were the:

1. **Vast geographic distances** over which the members are located - members are located as far as Broome which 600km north east of Port Hedland through to Tom Price which is approximately 500 kms South West of Port Hedland.
2. **Lack of "connection"** that existed amongst the members – it became evident there is no network of any nature amongst operators within this industry and within this

Figure 5.1 (cont'd): Challenges faced by the Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry (Final Report)

region. In most instances there is only one operator within each town. Some operators are members of a national industry group but don't appear to use this on a local level.

3. **Absence of a training culture** within this industry and within the region – most caravan parks are privately owned and operated and to some degree involve people that have retired from their first career, eg. Farming. Also, very few members have formal qualifications
4. **Nature of business ownership** – most parks are of a small business nature and often owned and operated by couples. Staff are generally only employed on a casual or permanent part time basis which prohibits commitment by owners and operators to non-business activities.
5. **Seasonal nature of the industry** in relation to the project time frame – a major challenge to the tourism industry in this region is to overcome the perception that there are two distinct seasons in the Northwest, the dry and the wet. Consequently the caravan industry operates at peak levels until November and then experiences a sharp decline until March/April during which some parks operate at minimum staff levels or shut down completely. This results in owner/operators working at full capacity for most of the year. This was also compounded in the 2001/2 season as very mild weather conditions were experienced which has contributed to a longer season.
6. **Lack of technology available**– In this region electronic communication has not been widely taken up. This can be attributed to level of capitalisation, technical expertise of users, lack of technical support, and inconsistent power supply (generators in some areas) in some of the remote areas.
7. **Competitive nature** that exists within the industry – there is a challenge to introduce a sense of healthy cooperation that would increase the overall level of market share with benefits to the whole industry as opposed to a current view of each operator being in direct competition. This doesn't dominate the local industry but is evident on occasion.

Creating a Community of Practice among the Caravan Park industry personnel in far north west Western Australia is a high-risk undertaking and stretches the categories of challenges identified by Wenger et al (2002).

▼ **Overcoming barriers of time and geography**

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Almost all the 2001 VET communities found the time frame of four months too short to fully benefit from the experience. Eight-twelve months emerged from the evaluation as a more appropriate minimum period for community development:

By the time funds are approved and we get going the group has 16-20 weeks to establish, build and succeed. Given competing demands on VET managers' availability it would be far more successful if the ACE group could meet over 8-12 months. Participation rates at the face-to-face workshops in a short burst of 4 months do not reflect the genuine interest in this network. (ACE NSW Final Report)

Time or lack of time was a major challenge. Members were willing to contribute but, when it came to committing time to carry out tasks and making arrangements for meetings, generally the same few people did all the behind-the-scenes work. (WA Assessors' Network Final Report).

A problem for many groups was the geographical distance between members. The National Horticulture Providers Network met this issue with the astute use of communications technology:

The National Horticulture Providers Network has members in each State. For our Community of Practice the major challenge has always been distance. It is difficult and costly to meet face-to-face, and in summer time, daylight saving in some states limits the times in the day that phone calls are an option.

The way we have met the challenge of communications over distance is to rely heavily on email. When we feel there is a need for discussion, teleconferences are arranged with costs organised so that each participant pay their own share. During this project the Horticulture Providers Network held two teleconferences to discuss this project and other network business. (The National Horticulture Providers Network Final Report)

Catering for the variety and number of VET organisations

Managing a Community of Practice with finite resources and catering for the variety of VET organisations and demands was a challenge to many groups:

Time and staff resources are critical issues for ACE NSW RTOs. Even in the relatively larger metropolitan organisations the VET managers express concerns about balancing agendas, lead times and the increasing complexity of the VET system that they have to manage. ACE operates on a small business model and while management is very supportive of staff professional development, this usually has to fit within already tight deadlines. Recognising this issue is critical to the success of professional development projects such as Reframing the Future. The 'Community of Practice' (sub-program) has to stay flexible and tolerant of these demands. (ACE NSW Final Report)

The National ITAB Workplace Communication project is another example of a VET Community of Practice bravely involving a large number of organisations: it attempted to engage with over twenty ITABs. The challenges faced by this community included:

Diverse nature of ITABs – numbers of staff, locations, number of people per industry represented, different levels of interest, knowledge and experience in the area of workplace communication.

Resourcing – not just financial, but where few ITAB staff are trying to keep a grasp of many and varied areas.

Training Package Development – are at different stages of the development and review process. This in itself created some implicit problems with attendance and the priority given to some issues over others.

Moving projects quickly and strategically – where the work of the Community of Practice is above and beyond the normal work load.

To have the Strategic Position of ITABs to impact upon workplace communication practices recognised by a variety of external bodies and well as by industries represented. (National ITAB Workplace Communication project Final Report)

The Equal Voices West Coast College Community of Practice nominated four major challenges for their community. They cited a mixture of knowledge-based, attitudinal and organisational hurdles, as set out in the table below.

Table 5.1: Challenges faced by the Equal Voices West Coast College community (Final Report)

Challenges	Discussion
Lack of understanding regarding NTF	In the initial stages, some Community of Practice members had very little understanding of the NTF and did not think they had a role in its implementation. As a result of information sessions and other workshop activities, members have begun to develop an appreciation of their role and responsibility in relation to the NTF. A significant development is that members have used 'mind maps' to document the implications of the AQTF standards for their jobs and work areas.
Work pressures	Members expressed concern that work pressures often precluded their ongoing commitment to forums such as Equal Voices. This has been reflected in the fact that not all members have been able to attend every workshop or other activity organised during the project due to other work commitments
Devalued role of networking	Members were concerned that 'networking' was not valued or recognised as a professional development activity of equal importance as a 'formal' or structured training program. This raised fears about the future of the Community of Practice beyond the funding period.
Paradigm shift from 'project' to self-managed community	As the project neared completion the need became apparent to make a shift from being a project with defined start and finish dates, pre-defined outcomes and reporting requirements to becoming a self-managed Community of Practice that sets its own agenda. This shift is critical to the continuity of the community beyond the funding period and its progression to the 'active' stage of development

Gaining legitimacy and support from senior management

The West Coast report noted members' concern that networking was not considered a legitimate activity, an example of 'marginalisation' (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). A related challenge is not receiving management support, a concern expressed by the National Horticulture Providers' Network:

A challenge that is more of an obstacle to some Community of Practice members than others is gaining support from their upper management for National Horticulture Providers Network activities. This can be a real problem if funding is required for travel, teleconferences, etc. Not all managers understand that if any of their motivated and proactive lecturers wish to understand the "big picture" issues of VET, it will be of benefit to the performance of their college. The challenge for these network members is to continually promote the activities of the Network and to prove the value by tangible means such as negotiating collaborative arrangements with other network members. Teleconferences, emails and phone calls have all played a part in giving everyone enough positive promotional material and contacts with good ideas. (National Horticulture Providers Network Final Report)

The lack of legitimacy of Communities of Practice was noted in the SA Public Service Final Report:

Participants stressed that they have little time and that there is currently little value given to participation in the Community of Practice in terms of status.

One participant felt that given the limited time she had, she needed to pursue another activity scheduled for the same time and that "was likely to have kudos" on her CV. (SA Public Service Final Report)

Agreeing on definitions

Differences in interpretations of key words, including management and network, was an issue for a number of communities:

A challenge was obtaining a joint shared understanding of the difference between a Community of Practice and a network. (Print and Graphic Arts Final Report)

The challenge that group members faced throughout, was that in discussing even the most basic issues (using concepts like 'management', 'competency' or 'learning') participants in a conversation perceived and used concepts differently. Differences stem from educational background and disciplines, level of education (whether the participants have a technical or conceptual grasp of issues) as well as different attitudes and values towards people and work. (SA Public Service Final Report)

Catering for different types of learners

Echoing Wenger, McDermott & Snyder's (2002) comment about the dangers of members becoming too dependent on facilitators, the Institute of TAFE Tasmania Final Report noted some challenges related to the group's learning needs:

encouraging participants to actively 'drive' the learning rather than to be passive recipients of information.

defining the shared learning needs of a disparate group. (Institute of TAFE Tasmania Final Report)

Similarly, RMIT commented on the challenge of 'catering for different learning preferences in the community and facilitating different kinds of participation.' (RMIT Final Report)

Overcoming dogmatism

The Print and Graphic Arts community was threatened by the problem Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) called 'dogmatism'—refusing to accommodate any variations to established methods:

Challenging the existing practices and benefits of the OnFX consortium network i.e., incorporating/overlying the theoretical aspects of a Community of Practice onto an existing network. (Print and Graphic Arts Final Report)

Collaborating with competitors

A unique feature of some of the Communities of Practice in the 2001 Reframing the Future sub-program, compared to most of the Communities of Practice depicted in the international literature, is the presence of competitors in the community. This added to the challenges for convenors and facilitators:

A challenge also was to remove talking/sharing barriers and develop sense of trust between people who consider themselves competitors in the current VET environment. (WA Assessors' Network Final Report)

Managing diversity

The diversity of membership is a recurring theme in the reports from the 2001 VET Communities of Practice, as articulated by the Queensland Health Training Package group:

Perhaps the greatest challenge that was faced by the group was the diversity of background that the participants brought to the meetings. Some of the job titles of the participants included: Ambulance officer; Registered nurse; Dental assistant and; Homeopathic

Practitioner. The Health Training Package covers dental health work, ambulance work, natural therapies, and general and allied health services. Other areas that will be using segments of the package include first aid, aged care, enrolled nursing, and mental health work. Participants from all of these areas attended the meeting. While they came from diverse sectors, the commonality was the Health Training Package. The group acknowledged the diversity in their backgrounds but worked together to solve problems as they were identified. In any case, many of the issues that were discussed were relevant to all sectors. (Qld Health Training Package Group Final Report)

Managing competing demands

The RMIT facilitator was sensitive to a range of competing demands on the community:

competing demands during a very busy time in the academic calendar

competing demands on organisational resources, eg, time, funding and different priorities at University and local levels

varying roles, responsibilities and experience of community members impacting upon decisions around joint enterprise, i.e. maintaining relevancy for individual members, departments and the organisation

developing and managing knowledge that is of critical importance to the “business and community members”

setting up some boundaries around what is possible and achievable, i.e. fear that the community could be potentially exploited. (RMIT Final Report)

Coping with fluctuating membership

One of the themes identified by RMIT, balancing the needs of members and their organisation, was also noted by the SA Public Service group, who listed as one of their challenges ‘readiness and framework issues that pertain to “strategic buy in” across and within organisations.’ (SA Public Service Final Report) The SA Public Service community also struggled with the challenges of fluctuating membership:

Fluctuating membership and people wanting to join at various stages without continuity and with different levels of commitment. Only a small core group contributed throughout. (SA Public Service Final Report)

Resisting amnesia

One problem that Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) note is ‘amnesia’, which occurs when communities do not document any insights (p.148). The SA Public Service Report expressed concern with some members not keeping learning logs:

Mid-term the participants relied on conversation and some referred to their learning logs to jog retrospective memory. But not everyone kept logs, as discussed elsewhere. Process-oriented evaluation relies on ongoing reflection. Those who did not note processes in their logs may have lost some of the process content. (SA Public Service Report Final Report)

Coping with delays in documentation availability

A problem unique to the VET sector in Australia is that the timing of the launch of new Training Packages is often difficult to predict, creating challenges for professional development activities. The Queensland Health Training Package group experienced this delay:

Another challenge that the group faced was the inability of anyone to get a final, or close-to-final copy of the Health Training Package which we expected to have to implement in Semester One. The package had been withdrawn from the national ITAB's website in June, and we were aware that considerable change had occurred since that time. No-one had a copy of the complete units of competency as they had been withdrawn well before they were finalised. This made discussion of some of the delivery issues more limited than participants had desired. However, participants worked through as many of the issues that they could in the available time. (The package has not had final endorsement and so will not be implemented until Semester Two. Teachers will have more time to examine the package before implementation in Semester Two.) (Queensland Health Training Package community Final Report)

Learning from the challenges

RMIT found that identifying the challenges in their 2001 Community of Practice is assisting in their planning in 2002:

A variety of challenges or hurdles were encountered as the community undertook its work. While the experience was rather limited, it was helpful in clearly identifying factors, which both help and hinder participation. It is with this in mind we are currently rethinking how the community might take up its work in 2002. (RMIT Final Report)

Concluding comment

Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) remind us that Communities of Practice reflect all the complex interrelationships of their human members. (p.144). The National Training Framework is encouraging the development of relationships not previously heralded in VET, particularly relationships between providers and industry, relationships between different providers and relationships between different educational sectors, such as Schools and VET. A Community of Practice is emerging as a valid mechanism for enabling VET personnel to manage such complex relationships.

Using Communities of Practice to manage relationships in VET requires high-level skills such as catering for the variety and number of VET organisations within the one community, gaining legitimacy for Communities of Practice from managers who are unfamiliar with the concept and supporting a community in the face of competing demands.

What benefits did individuals gain from their Communities of Practice?

This chapter compares the potential benefits of Communities of Practice for individuals—as identified in the international literature—with the benefits obtained by the members of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice.

Key points

The key points made in this chapter include the following:

1. International experience suggests that benefits of Communities of Practice for individuals include the fostering of trust, improvements to their professional lives, access to new knowledge and an increased ability to manage change.
2. Analysis of the VET 2001 Communities of Practice showed that the benefits matched the theory: the communities fostered communication and sharing and linked the members to new knowledge while also concretely enhancing the work of the VET professional.
3. The analysis also indicated that if the individual benefited from a Community of Practice, the benefits flowed through to the organisation.

Potential and actual benefits

Chapter 1 of this report provided a discussion of the benefits of Communities of Practice, based on the literature. This following discussion provides an analysis of the benefits of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice for individuals.

The following table sets out four of the potential benefits for individuals, as identified in the literature and discussed in Chapter 1, with matching exemplars from the 2001 projects.

Table 6.1: Benefits for individuals participating in the 2001 VET Communities of Practice

Benefits identified in the literature	Sample benefits from VET Communities of Practice
Communities of Practice enable employees to manage change	'It is within the Community of Practice that these people are free to express and share some of their concerns, wishes, problems and practices in order to find solutions for their work practice.' (Barrier Reef Final Report)
provide the practitioner with access to new knowledge	The network promotes a learning culture in an environment that does not normally allow for this.' (National ITAB Workplace Communication Final Report) The online forum provided opportunities for interaction and networking, sharing of experience, knowledge and expertise and

Table 6.1 (cont'd): Benefits for individuals participating in the 2001 VET Communities of Practice

Benefits identified in the literature	Sample benefits from VET Communities of Practice
	documenting the stories of our professional journeys. This has created a stronger sense of community for the members and an opportunity to recognise and celebrate their achievements. (Equal Voices West Coast College Final Report)
foster trust and a sense of common purpose in the individual	<p>“There was a sense of common purpose, coupled with almost a great relief that others were experiencing similar challenges to them and by finding more information made it easier to manage.” (WA Workplace Assessors’ Final Report)</p> <p>Collegiality and group processes. (SA Public Service Final Report)</p> <p>I am still surprised by the impetus that this group has maintained in pursuing their goals and in knowledge sharing. It seemed as if the shared goal (quality implementation of the Health Training Package) created immediate personal relationships that supported the sort of sharing that usually occurs after considerable time. (Queensland Health Training Package Final Report)</p>
add value to professional lives	<p>“This project will add value to the professional lives of those involved and enable them to continue with developing a common purpose.” (Murray Institute Wine Industry Final Report)</p> <p>Improve professional strengths. (SA Public Service Final Report)</p> <p>Making personal contact with other people involved in VET they might otherwise never have connected with. Personal professional development – access to the latest information related to the NTF, opportunity to listen to informed presenters and presentations. Shared recognition of professionalism, and raising of pride in the industry and profession. Peer review and recognition. (WA Assessors’ Network Final Report)</p>

The above table provides an indication of the breadth and importance of the individual benefits from the VET Communities of Practice—a significant finding from the evaluation of the 2001 projects.

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Members of the National Horticulture Providers’ Network community provided these individual responses to the question ‘What were the benefits for individuals from participating in the Community of Practice?’ Their responses reinforce the benefits identified above—communities fosters trust, add value to professional lives, enable members to access to new knowledge and enable members to manage change:

“Gives an opportunity to learn how others do things differently.”

“Allows you to not feel isolated and alone in what you deliver. You are only a phone call or email away from real professional help!”

“Can share ideas with people on the same wave length.”

“Now I have contacts that I wouldn’t hesitate to bounce ideas off because there is a sense of trust established in knowing the person I am dealing with.”

“An opportunity to share the load in both the volume of work and identification of issues and concerns eg reviewing the training packages and development of such resources such as Toolboxes.”

“Left the meeting with a sense of fulfilment in the time I had spent. Recognised that my perspective on the Training Package is largely ‘in tune’ with those members from other States. (comforting) Given that we are working with a National Training Package, this is important.”

“Great friendships developed.”

“Led to other interesting activities – work with other organisations and States.”

“Increased personal credibility and status within your organisation. You now have a better understanding of how things work at the national level and have the contacts to find out what is happening.” (National Horticulture Providers’ Network Final Report)

The convenor of the Institute of TAFE Tasmania community listed the benefits to individuals as follows:

Empowerment; enhancement of professional confidence and expertise; access to other resources, internal and external to the organisation; increased understanding of AQTF requirements; valuing of different perspectives; sharing and updating knowledge through social participation; and reflecting on own practice. (Institute of TAFE Tasmania Final Report)

In discussing the benefits of the Community of Practice, Centrelink’s convenor placed the emphasis on peer support and self-analysis:

It formalised their contacts with other learning professionals and provided them with instant support. The interaction also encouraged them to examine their work practices and to consider their role in a wider VET context not just a Centrelink context. (Centrelink Final Report)

Different benefits for old and new members

The facilitator of the Print and Graphic Arts community noted the value to both new members of their existing network and to long-term members:

The benefits to individuals crosses over to benefits for the organisation. Any aspect that enables the individual to undertake their role more capably or efficiently should translate to a benefit for the organisation.

The benefits for individuals were mixed and varied as would be expected across a group of 12. It was Shane and Josephine’s first encounter with managers from the other Graphic Arts TAFE Institutions around Australia. This new experience resulted in a steep learning curve particularly in respect of familiarisation of practices and experiences across Australia, especially when compared with those managers that have been involved in the original network prior to this project.

All participants within the Community of Practice valued the opportunity to participate in a safe and supportive network i.e. the opportunity to share personal experiences without risk of ridicule or judgment.

Extracts from mid project questionnaire: *‘given contact to colleagues who represented the views/philosophies of other States.’; ‘enabled me to work with very positive TAFE professionals’; ‘provided a variety of challenges that were essentially tackled with a common focus’.* (Print and Graphic Arts Final Report)

Individuals and organisations benefiting equally

Taking into account the comment above about benefits for individuals also being benefits for their organisations, Figure 6.1 provides a summary of the benefits to both individuals and organisations of the multi-organisational Workplace Communication community.

Figure 6.1: Benefits from the National Industry Training Advisory Board (ITAB) Network for Workplace Communication (Final Report)

The National Industry Training Advisory Board (ITAB) Network for Workplace Communication project involved informal contact with personnel from all twenty-three ITABs from around Australia and regular contact with six ITAB representatives. Using a sequence of meetings and teleconferences, coupled with a number of the group participating in a major conference, and supported by regular emails providing documentation of use to the members, the network activity was intense during the three-month project. The network aims included providing professional development for ITAB staff to facilitate the inclusion of language, literacy and numeracy in Training Package implementation within industries and enterprises.

The benefits for individuals involved in the Workplace Communication Community of Practice extended considerably beyond the original aims and included:

Resource group of contacts, willing to support and understand issues, share ideas and show empathy for difficulties experienced.

Increase in personal confidence to pursue the issue of workplace communication.

Increased knowledge about a variety of workplace communication issues and projects.

Better informed staff members within their own workplace.

Increased courage of staff members to question workplace communication issues within own ITAB and industry area – “what are we doing about...?”

Has provided time for problem solving, reflection and social interaction.

“some of the best ideas were thought of over coffee break!” (National ITAB Workplace Communication Final Report, Dec 2001)

Similarly the benefits of the National ITAB Workplace Communication Community of Practice for organisations were extensive:

Raised profile of workplace communication in industry training.

Information discussed has had input into other reviews and projects.

Network has been invited to input the industry perspective into other projects.

Has increased respect for language, literacy and numeracy by ITAB group and respective industries.

Raised profile of Workplace Communication has been articulated in ITAB Strategic Plans in some cases, while ITABs are encouraged to consider how they will address workplace communication in areas such as Training Package reviews.

Industry personnel are now beginning to understand that workplace communication is an issue about quality and not just equity.

Training Packages were designed so that language, literacy and numeracy underpins all competencies at all AQF levels. This is beginning to be understood by industry and VET organisations.

Raised the profile of workplace communications

Led to the dissemination of information and products.

The input into other projects will, in time, impact upon VET organisations

Promotion of models of good practice

As a result of this Community of Practice, a more coherent message about workplace communication in Training Packages is being presented to VET organisations. (National ITAB Workplace Communication Final Report)

The Workplace Communication Community of Practice is an example of a committed group of professionals working outside of their ITAB confines to embrace a generic issue, workplace communication, which is of importance to all Training Packages. If ITABs represent a formal, vertical structure within VET, then the Workplace Communication Community of Practice operated horizontally, crossing over vertical ITABs and providing extra value to the VET system by working collaboratively.

The Equal Voices West Coast Community of Practice also focused on a lateral force within VET: female personnel. In focusing on gender equity issues, the Equal Voices community created the potential to develop a cooperative network of women across all TAFE Colleges in Western Australia. Both individuals and organisations benefit from this innovative perspective.

Figure 6.2: Benefits of the Equal Voices Community of Practice at West Coast College (Final Report)

Regarding benefits to individuals, the community placed strong emphasis on the identification of gender equity issues associated with communication, leadership and management styles and the exploration of the linkages between these issues and National Training Framework implementation. For individuals in the Community of Practice this focus resulted a sense of empowerment – ‘members have established a sense of community and a feeling of being supported by other members...Individual members feel supported because they are now aware of the collective skills the community has and are able to seek assistance from other members when needed.’

For the organisation and the TAFE system in Western Australia, Equal Voices created the potential to develop a cooperative network of women across all TAFE Colleges in Western Australia. The community is also in the process of documenting members’ skills, talents and professional experience, and this information will form the basis for developing a mentoring strategy. (Equal Voices West Coast TAFE Final Report).

Varieties of benefits

The Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry project resulted in social, professional and economic benefits for individual community members:

Benefits have been broadly classified as:

Social – in a geographically vast and remote region the Community has an enormous social benefit in providing an avenue for social discourse with a peer group that wouldn’t be found within the physical community in which they live.

Professional – It is anticipated the Community will achieve significant professional benefits through the sharing of information which will increase overall industry knowledge, provide a reference point and may contribute to establishing of benchmarks and best practice. This hasn’t been achieved as yet due to the formative stage of the Community however, the potential has been clearly identified by participants.

Economic – the Community has enormous potential to contribute to the economic well being of caravan park operators and to tourism in the region through a greater awareness and “take –up” of training. It is not unreasonable to envisage the introduction of a sense of constructive competition (a desire to be as good as, if not better, than other parks in customer service, facilities, information provision, etc) through individual’s involvement with the Community. (Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry Final Report)

For RMIT, the following comments are indicative of the kind of individual benefit emerging from the experience and ‘the kinds of things that happened for people’:

“I found it a satisfying experience”

“Personally empowering”

“Part of the student’s foggiest is our foggiest around the change”

“How do you solve problems in a program team of one?”

The Community of Practice provided a forum to share problems and solutions.

From the convenor – “For me personally, I continue to learn and grow, and be surprised and inspired by what I feel, hear and see”. (RMIT Final Report)

The NSW TAFE Staff Development Officers’ community found a cluster of benefits for individuals from their Community of Practice experience:

Time out to find out about major ideas and directions that are affecting TAFE NSW and staff development in particular.

Meeting the ‘experts’ and getting things first hand instead of being filtered through the usual hierarchical layers. Adding to our individual networks.

Forming more cooperative relationships with one another – increased trust and information sharing.

Engaging in a new model of workbased learning – the Community of Practice. (NSW TAFE Staff Development Final Report)

Concluding comment

The discussion in this chapter demonstrates that the benefits of Communities of Practice for VET practitioners in 2001 matched the benefits identified in the literature, such as enabling VET personnel to manage change and providing VET personnel with access to new knowledge. Recurring themes in the discussion in this chapter are how the VET communities fostered trust, communication and sharing, while also concretely enhancing the work of the VET professional. The discussion also suggested that if the individual benefited from a Community of Practice, the benefits flowed through to the organisation.

What benefits did organisations gain from the Communities of Practice?

This chapter compares the potential benefits of Communities of Practice for organisations—as identified in the international literature—with the actual benefits obtained by the organisations participating in the 2001 VET Communities of Practice.

Key points

The key points made in this chapter include the following:

1. An examination of the literature shows that the organisational benefits of Communities of Practice can include the informal dissemination of valuable information, improvements in productivity, the fostering of innovation and the reinforcement of strategic direction. The 2001 VET communities collectively modelled all these organisational benefits.
2. A number of benefits identified in the VET 2001 Communities of Practice project extend the findings from the literature. For instance, the RMIT community ‘acts to foster, nourish and reward professional integrity and passion’ as well as ‘spreading knowledge and expertise and thus becomes a valuable succession planning forum’.
3. One reason why the VET Communities of Practice produced such a rich array of benefits is because VET professionals used Communities of Practice to respond constructively to the many challenges of implementing the National Training Framework (NTF). The NTF involves, in part, implementing newly-framed competency-based Training Packages, providing workplace assessment, developing multiple relationships between training providers, industry and individual enterprises and working in a competitive training market.

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Potential and actual benefits

The table below summarises the organisational benefits of Communities of Practice, as identified in the literature and discussed in Chapter 1, with matching exemplars from the 2001 VET communities.

Table 7.1: Benefits for organisations participating in the 2001 VET Communities of Practice

Benefits identified in the literature	Sample benefits from VET Communities of Practice
Communities of Practice enable informal dissemination of valuable information	<p>'The sharing of ideas in a non-adversarial atmosphere.' (National ITAB Workplace Communication Final Report)</p> <p>'Information sharing and resource sharing occurred as many participants brought resources and developed ideas further with others. Alliances emerged between several groups e.g. sub-Communities of practice of smaller RTOs got together, regional groups made connections. Dialogue occurred between individuals and groups who may otherwise have never connected.' (WA Assessors' Network Final Report)</p>
facilitate transfer of best practice	<p>"It allows me to 'introduce' TAFE Queensland staff to like minds in other States and vice versa to share resources, experiences and visit worksites." (National Horticulture Providers' Network Final Report)</p> <p>The Community of Practice enabled the sharing of Centrelink Area experiences across the entire community. (Centrelink Final Report)</p>
foster innovation	<p>'Accelerated the finding of solutions and different ways forward.' (RMIT Final Report)</p> <p>The Community of Practice implemented a change program in the Laboratory Operations Training Package. (Murray Institute Wine Industry Final Report)</p>
reinforce strategic direction	<p>'accelerated compliance with AQTF requirements, particularly industry involvement in determining assessment strategies.' (TAFE Tasmania Final Report)</p> <p>"The aim of this project was to strengthen the existing OnFX network and to look for ways to capitalise on the existing network. Both these aims have been met. The network has been strengthened by the inclusion of Tasmania, the reinforcing of individual relationships and the welcoming of new individuals into the network.' (Print & Graphic Arts Network Final Report)</p>
decrease the learning curve for new employees	<p>'Participants developed methods of support for staff who were new in the Institutes and to the VET sector.' (Qld Health Training Package, Final Report)</p>
help new employees to understand how their role fits into the wider organisational context	<p>"The interaction also encouraged them to examine their work practices and to consider their role in a wider VET context not just a Centrelink context.' (Centrelink Final Report)</p> <p>'Although difficult to measure, there appeared to be an increase in self worth and pride in the accomplishments of our Network once the group understood that our Network was a Community of Practice. Participating in this national project gave us an opportunity to examine who we are, why we are there, what we do, and to realise what an important contribution we have made to Horticulture training over the years.' (National Horticulture Providers' Network Final Report)</p>
help companies to match the talents of their staff with internal opportunities	<p>'Equal Voices membership cuts across campus and work functions and is helping to support the College's recent restructure from a campus-based to a College-wide orientation.' (Equal Voices, West Coast TAFE Final Report)</p>
facilitate rapid responses to customer needs and problems	<p>'A more efficient implementation of Nationally Recognised Learning across the Agency directly relates to improvements in the service we provide to customers. The commitment within the Agency to linking accredited qualifications to organisational learning is substantial and the development of the Community of Practice directly supported that commitment.' (Centrelink Final Report)</p>

The following discussion shows that a number of benefits identified in the VET 2001 Communities of Practice project extend the findings from the literature about the benefits for individuals and organisations. For instance, in the following summary of the benefits to RMIT of their 2001 Community of Practice, the benefits reach beyond those listed in the left hand column above. The RMIT group found that their Community of Practice, in a 'changing workforce... helped to retain and share stories, histories and past contexts'. The Community of Practice was a way of valuing reflective work, 'giving it a legitimate place to operate and engage in (people now need to authorise themselves in this space)'. The RMIT Community of Practice has resulted in the setting up of multi-discipline relationships across the organisation, with the potential for working across boundaries. It also 'acts to foster, nourish and reward professional integrity and passion' as well as 'spreading knowledge and expertise and thus becomes a valuable succession planning forum'. The facilitator reflected:

our Community of Practice is operating in turbulent and uncertain times. People are struggling with their 'unknowingness' and the safety, trust and goodwill needed to deal with the ambiguity is absent. The paradox is however, that Communities of Practice enable these vital pre-requisites to help people through periods of uncertainty and change. (RMIT Final Report)

Tangible and intangible benefits

Like RMIT, Centrelink identified both tangible and intangible benefits from its Community of Practice. Tangible benefits included the development of a focus group process and of a draft recognition policy:

We used a number of methods and have now developed a detailed focus group process that has spun out of the Community of Practice. The focus groups are used by Centrelink to gain endorsement from stakeholders on issues such as choice of competencies when we implement a Training Package.

We also saw the development of a draft recognition policy, however this was only a tangible product: the less tangible outcomes were more important. (Centrelink Final Report)

Cross-industry benefits

The importance to VET of the benefits of Communities of Practice is also demonstrated by the Wine Industry project managed by the Murray Institute of TAFE, which consisted of two TAFE staff, one ITAB staff member and ten industry personnel. The project focused on implementing a change program in the Laboratory Operations Training Package and most of the project activity occurred within the premises of the industry participants in the Riverland wine-growing area of South Australia, particularly at Southcorp, a multi-national company. The benefits of the Community of Practice for the organisations involved included:

A cross-industry approach to the delivery of the Laboratory Operations Training Package was developed with industry consultation.

We liaised with Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE for the specialist areas of pathology and other medical related lab training

Sharing of laboratory facilities occurred across companies, to broaden the experience and range of training options for staff

Customised training was delivered using industry facilities

Access was available in the workplace to VET expertise and knowledge. (Murray Institute of TAFE Final Report)

The Wine Industry project not only assisted the participating enterprises to better plan their training, it also enabled Murray Institute staff to develop a closer link with industry, 'in supporting and mentoring Workplace Assessors based in industry'. (Murray Institute of TAFE Final Report). These outcomes are core aims of VET providers in Australia, and are fundamental to the implementation of the industry-led, demand-driven national training system.

For the Institute of TAFE Tasmania (ITT), the benefits to the organisation included learning from previous nationally funded staff development activities shared across the wider organisation; accelerated compliance with AQTF requirements, particularly industry involvement in determining assessment strategies; enhanced motivation of staff; development of a new model for quality assuring assessment; development of a guide to support professional development of staff; and increased practitioner influence on management policy decisions. (ITT Final Report)

Cross-border benefits

The National Horticulture Providers' Network asked its community members to itemise the organisational benefits of their Community of Practice. Their comments follow:

"Confidence that TAFE horticulture Australia has representation on significant committees. It provides an opportunity for our issues to be addressed in important forums eg ANTA, RTCA."

"Have taken what I have learnt back to my state. Have recommended the ANTA Toolbox (Series 3 Horticulture) not only to other public providers, but also to private providers who don't have the resources of a government-funded TAFE."

"Has led to staff development opportunities and ideas for all TAFE Tasmania staff."

"Gives the college a profile in the National area, which may not have occurred. Has let staff feel good about what they do."

"This has provided a momentum which may result in a National Conference for teachers. Exciting stuff...To harness enthusiasm and draw in teachers who never get out of a classroom is some of the best professional development available."

"This is the beginning of a lot of exchange. Victoria visiting NSW is a great start that we will make ongoing."

"Confidence that we are producing learning materials that are what the other States want as well and confirmation that our work is of a quality acceptable to all."

"There is the real possibility of collaboration with colleges in other States on a wide range of exciting projects."

"I feel that I have more confidence in the standards of delivery and assessment at our college. We are on the same wave length as the other States." (National Horticulture Providers' Network Final Report)

Cross-organisational benefits

The National ITAB Workplace Communication community also found scores of organisational benefits that extend beyond the scope of those cited in the international literature:

Recognised potential for increased efficiency and strategic use of funds to develop services and products by members and ITABs.

Identification of crucial issues within the Training System.

The network promotes a learning culture in an environment that does not normally allow for this.

The network has leveraged the issue of workplace communication within ITABs and this has been recognised by external bodies such as DEST and ACAL.

Has provided opportunities for discussion of issues with people not normally in our everyday sphere.

Has kept the issue of workplace communication alive and as a priority even in ITABs where there weren't staff dedicated solely to this area.

Has provided access to expertise, not normally available.

Knowledge, expertise and ideas have had a flow on and ripple effect to industry and VET

Has provided opportunities for being supported and supportive in a non-threatening environment. (there are no 'dumb' questions – just questions)

Opportunities for dissemination of new information and products.

Has supported cross industry projects on a national level.

Has established a strong link with Australian Council of Adult Literacy and had strong representation at ACAL Forum – Literacy and Learning at Work – disseminating information to literacy practitioners.

Has promoted its vision and mission through Literacy Link, with Panel representation at Forum and Industry Case Study presentations.

Spin offs have been far wider than just in the area of workplace communication. It has provided members with personal contacts that they access and talk with about a variety of other ITAB areas.

The National ITAB Workplace Communication Network has recognised the importance of People, not just products, to further the National Training Agenda. (National ITAB Workplace Communication Final Report)

The horticulture and workplace communications communities are cross-organisational and cross-state/territory groupings. Each community is able to look past the difficulties of operating across Australia in order to meet the challenges posed by the implementation of a national training system.

Concluding comment

The VET Communities of Practice project managed by the Reframing the Future program in 2001 provided a range of benefits for the organisations involved. These benefits reinforce and enrich the findings in the international literature. One reason why the VET Communities of Practice produced such a rich array of benefits is because VET professionals used Communities of Practice to respond constructively to the challenges of implementing the National Training Framework (NTF). The NTF involves, in part, implementing newly-framed competency-based Training Packages, providing workplace assessment, developing multiple relationships between training providers, industry and individual enterprises and, on occasion, competing

for market-share. Communities of Practice provide VET personnel with flexible and fluid mechanisms for developing the knowledge, relationships and expertise required to meet the challenge of the NTF.

Another reason why the VET Communities of Practice produced such a rich array of organisational benefits is the calibre of the VET professional. This report provides concrete, specific insights into the challenges faced by VET personnel, the desire of many personnel to meet these challenges, the knowledge and expertise VET personnel bring to their practice and the high-order skills of some VET personnel in convening and facilitating communities of VET practitioners. The findings from this evaluation are a tribute to the professionalism of VET personnel, including their passion for their work, their commitment to their teaching discipline or management field and their willingness to share their knowledge with their peers.

How did the Communities of Practice support the implementation of the National Training Framework?

This chapter investigates the effectiveness of the VET 2001 Communities of Practice in achieving a goal of the Reframing the Future sub-program: assisting the implementation of the National Training Framework. Examples of how the VET Communities of Practice assisted the NTF are also spread through many other chapters of this report.

Key points

The key points made in this chapter include the following:

1. Implementing the National Training Framework is not simply a matter of delivering a training product. It involves working with the fluidity and unpredictability of relationships between providers and industry. The VET 2001 Communities of Practice focused considerable attention on relationship building.
2. To implement the NTF, provider training need to move through stages of awareness about the issues, to developing knowledge about training options, to skill building and then implementation strategies. A number of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice consciously worked through these steps.
3. Some Communities of Practice sought concrete, practical outputs from their community work, such as guides for compliance with AQTF standards, while other communities focused on less tangible issues such as increasing members' confidence in managing the change from curriculum to Training Packages.

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Ways the communities assisted the NTF

The National Training Framework is challenging for a number of reasons: on the one hand it requires providers to establish new and enduring relationships with industry clients; on the other hand, the NTF is continually changing, evidenced by the updating of Training Packages and the recent introduction of the AQTF. The 2001 VET Communities of Practice each responded differently to implementing the NTF, depending on the needs of their industry clients and other contextual issues. For instance, the ACE NSW community adopted the following flexible response to the NTF:

Part of the strength of this group was to note that our discussions were at the 'proactive' end of VET implementation rather than "reactive" – for example as we shape ACE specific

evidence guides for AQTF standards or provide feedback on trailing on-line assessment systems. 'Expect the unexpected' and 'expect and plan for continuous change' are not just coping mechanism but genuine strategies for small RTOs attempting to manage VET policy implementation at a local level. (ACE NSW Final Report)

Developing relationships with industry

In contrast to the fluid, flexible approach of the many small RTOs in the ACE group, the state-wide Queensland Health Training Package community gained the following benefits from their project, in relation to the NTF: the development of a consistent response to some issues; clarity about the complexity of the training agenda and its requirements; introductions to key personnel; a better understanding by industry of the requirements for Institutes before delivery can occur; and a better understanding for Institute staff of the requirements of industry for training in this sector. (Queensland Health Training Package Final Report). The Queensland network was very focused on one issue, improved relationships with industry:

The focus of our Community of Practice was the development of expertise and industry partnerships that would support the implementation of a national Training Package within Queensland. The group is continuing in their aims of producing a better quality training product for students at TAFE and in the workplace. Representatives of industry were able to add their perspective to ensure that workplaces were having their needs met through the range of available electives. (Queensland Health Training Package Final Report).

The Wine Industry Community of Practice managed by Murray Institute realised a range of direct benefits related to the NTF:

Some of the highlights of our Community of Practice included:

Meetings in the Riverland across industries where those businesses decided to assist each other by amalgamating small groups so that the class sizes would be viable and all would be able to access training.

Talking with industry staff about their needs and the delivery issues that would enable their staff to access training and qualifications

Receiving funding support from the Riverland Development Corporation to enable 2 groups of students to complete the pre-vintage lab short course. (Number of unemployed students would have been otherwise unable to do the course.)

Closer matching of training initiatives with industry specific SOPS will lead to a more effective targeting of training initiatives

Generated a much closer link in supporting and mentoring Workplace Assessors based in industry

More holistic approach to training and assessing through project-based activities. (Murray Institute Wine Industry Final Report)

Gaining national collaboration

While the Queensland Health Training Package community focused on industry relationships across Queensland, the National Horticulture Providers' Network Community of Practice aimed to improve national collaboration and communication, in relation to the NTF:

One of these aims was to reinforce the collaborative arrangements in place for the implementation of the National Training Framework. Another was to encourage the enhancement of communication links and cooperative problem solving on a national basis.

All Network members feel comfortable to be able to ask for assistance from each other and are confident that they will receive a considered response. (National Horticulture Providers' Network Final Report)

In similar ways to the national Horticulture community, the Print and Graphic Arts Community of Practice focused on removing the isolation felt by staff in each State and Territory in delivering training. It also sought to remove the duplication in resource development:

All participants represent the single site within their State that delivers training programs related to the Printing Trades. This circumstance can result in 'isolation' due to lack of experiences to draw on at the local level. The Community of Practice participants benefit by being able to share and compare experiences and activities.

The minimisation of duplication of effort in resource development was achieved. The Community of Practice has already made significant cost savings across TAFE through the shared development of resources: i.e., NSW TAFE distributing new teaching resources on colour management etc.; SA TAFE distributing a trainee log book/record keeping system for new training package; and Qld distributing electronic copies of assessment guides and resources. (Print and Graphic Arts Final Report)

Unbundling the NTF

The ACE NSW Metropolitan Managers' Community of Practice unbundled the National Training Framework and undertook a number of practical activities in relation to specific aspects of the NTF, as outlined in the table below.

Table 8.1: Activities related to the NTF undertaken by the NSW ACE Community of Practice

Aspect of the NTF	Activities undertaken by the community
Mapping data	Mapping individual participant's awareness of the NTF. Mapping the uptake and delivery models for key Training Packages across this group of RTOs.
An AQTF Organisational checklist	A preliminary organisational checklist based on the ANTA Transition Guide to the AQTF was developed. This was used within each workplace between meetings to begin a process of assessment of the AQTF standards against existing RTO quality systems and to commence the prioritising of work across the whole organisation and in the specific areas of responsibility of the VET managers.
The ACE AQTF Priorities	The community developed an ACE-specific interpretation of the AQTF standards and which standards will require the greatest amounts of attention. This exercise brought the individual's workplace into sharper focus and this in turn led to a 'confirm and clarify' process. Participants' shared their interpretations of the AQTF and alignment to the broader quality strategy developed within the sector for adult education organisations – the ACE Council's ACE Quality Strategy. (NSW) As a product, this produced a checklist for the group to measure and plan changes into 2002. As a process, this helped with individuals visualising of priorities, timeframes, and their own professional development needs to manage these changes within each RTO.
The Information Technology Training Package	The Information Technology Training Package and in particular the anticipated release of the enhancements was discussed at length at the first, August meeting.

Table 8.1 (cont'd): Activities related to the NTF undertaken by the NSW ACE Community of Practice

Aspect of the NTF	Activities undertaken by the community
	<p>An invited ITAB representative was unable to attend at the last minute but we continued to remain abreast of these changes through the support of the DET ACE Services Field Officer, Mr Neil Harbridge, who attended this meeting and covered the changes to the IT package in detail.</p> <p>“Communication outputs” continue in this area beyond the project with new information circulating to RTOs via email.</p>
The Business Services Training Package in ACE	<p>The Business Services Training Package was launched by the ITAB during the project period, with back orders for the full package coming through in November.</p> <p>The November 2001 meeting spent time examining the packaging of qualifications and its application for ACE RTOs. Some leading RTOs provided detail on their intended use of the package in the marketplace.</p>
The Australian Quality Training Framework	<p>Draft ACE interpretation of the evidence guides and anticipated policy and procedure changes were developed across the project. Standards or areas examined in varying depth included discussion of assessment policy and processes in ACE.</p> <p>Sharing the latest information on products, information and other professional development opportunities for ACE RTOs occurred in these areas. Discussion was conducted of the ANTA Training Package Assessment Materials Project that was launched during the project months.</p>

Comprehending the AQTF

A major achievement of the Equal Voices West Coast College Community of Practice is that many members who were unaware of the NTF before their community formed ended up leading the way in their organisation:

The *Equal Voices* Community of Practice has provided an important forum for disseminating information about the NTF and the AQTF. An important outcome for the project is that members have developed an increased appreciation of their role and responsibility regarding AQTF implementation. This has been a major achievement, given that at the first workshop, many participants were not aware that the AQTF had any implications for them.

In subsequent workshops, *Equal Voices* members have considered each of the 12 AQTF Standards and have used “mind maps” to brainstorm and document the impact and implications of the standards on their jobs and their work areas. *Equal Voices* is the only group in the College that has had the opportunity to provide a “shop floor” perspective on AQTF implementation. (Equal Voices West Coast College Community Final Report)

For the WA Assessors Network, the Community of Practice enabled a better understanding of the elements of the NTF:

Key aspects were examined closely such as the AQTF, ARF and Training Packages across sectors and industry. Learning emerged through dialogue, sharing resources, information etc. Links were established cross-industry that had not previously been in place. (WA Assessors Network Final Report)

The Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry Community of Practice involved a range of caravan park owners and managers who focused on elements of the NTF:

There were significant challenges in establishing the community, however, the project is on the way to achieving its aims:

The workshop group that participated in the first Community of Practice meeting undertook a brainstorming exercise to identify the skills and knowledge required to work in the caravan industry. The results of this exercise very closely matched the competencies identified in the training package. This was very useful to the group as it provided an opportunity to recognise and articulate the diverse range of skills and knowledge they either had or were well on the way to developing.

The above exercise clearly identified links between industry requirements and the qualifications in the Training Package.

It was not possible to develop a range of appropriate, valid, and relevant learning and assessment tasks as this was beyond the existing capabilities of the membership of the Community.

Once again a course schedule was a little too ambitious given the composition of the group. During the meetings and contact with the WA tourism representative it became apparent there was an accreditation program available to caravan park owners and operators. This program was used to establish links and benefits between obtaining accreditation through an industry body and certification through the Training Package. It is not unforeseeable that caravan park operators will use accreditation to demonstrate relevant training package competencies with a view to certification.

Through the workshop process participants discussed the delivery options available to deliver VET training. Participants are now aware of the options and as stated above, strong links have been established between accreditation programs and Recognition of Current Competencies, Work Place Assessment and on the job training, all very new concepts to an industry that traditionally hasn't had a strong focus on training.

Concrete links to the NTF

For Centrelink, the Community of Practice provided concrete benefits for the NTF:

In practical terms we saw an interaction established between a major industry user of Training Packages (i.e. Centrelink) and the relevant ITABs. This should not be underestimated and the flow-on into the design of specific Centrelink competencies in the review of the CSHTP has been a tangible result. (Centrelink Final Report)

The National ITAB Workplace Communications community is in no doubt about the relevance of their community to the NTF:

This Community of Practice discussed an issue (workplace communication) that runs cross-industry and across all AQF levels. By working together the members have gained knowledge, ideas, contacts etc and this has leveraged the focus on this area, both within the ITAB community and within individual industries and training providers. It totally supported the implementation of the National Training Framework. (National ITAB Workplace Communications Final Report)

The Institute of TAFE Tasmania was very specific in its links to the NTF:

The Community of Practice focussed primarily on quality assurance of assessment that directly supports the implementation of the National Training Framework. In particular it supported implementation of Training Packages; compliance with AQTF standards 7, 8 and 9; effective use of ANTA assessment products. (Institute of TAFE Tasmania Final Report)

Increasing confidence in the NTF

The level of appreciation expressed by the community members surprised the convenor of the

Queensland Health Training Package community. Most of these benefits relate to an increased confidence with the NTF:

The benefits for the attendees were quite predictable. However, I could not predict the level of appreciation of the benefits by the attendees. The attendees reported the following benefits. They developed:

A better understanding of the content of the draft Health Training Package;

New and trusting relationships between institutes across the TAFE network- a feeling of connection;

Support networks for specialist vocational areas;

Methods of support for isolated colleagues in rural and remote locations;

Methods of support for staff who were new in the institutes and to the VET sector;

A face-to-face relationship with the ITAB and other industry members;

Confidence in their ability to manage the change from curriculum to the Training Package;

A sense that their contributions to the group and to the TAFE network were/are valued by others;

Confidence in the quality of the work that they do. (Queensland Health Training Package Community Final Report)

Concluding comment

The NTF is many-sided and demanding, implicitly requiring training providers not only to develop knowledge, skills, tools and processes in response to industry training needs, but also to develop relationships with industry, based on trust and openness. Communities of Practice facilitate this skill development and relationship building. Communities of Practice also help VET personnel to collaborate across state and territory borders and to gain in confidence.

Communities of Practice emerge from this evaluation study as a viable means for fostering the development, among providers, of knowledge about both training needs and relationships with industry clients. The implementation of the NTF will be enhanced if VET practitioners are provided with more opportunities to form Communities of Practice.

In what ways were the Communities of Practice involved in knowledge management?

This chapter compares the theoretical definitions of knowledge management with the knowledge management activities of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice.

Key points

The key points made in this chapter include the following:

1. Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, expert insight and grounded intuition, which the members of Communities of Practice can share and build.
2. VET managers can encourage staff to collaborate and share their knowledge with their peers and across the organisation, for the benefit of the individuals as well as for the organisation. The structure of a Community of Practice provides an ideal platform for such sharing of knowledge.

Theory

In the mid-late 1990s, the concept of knowledge management became popular in the western world, based on the belief that a company's strategic advantages often hinged on the knowledge of staff. Database companies were quick to suggest that the key to managing the knowledge of staff was to somehow channel all corporate knowledge into databases. However, definitions of knowledge such as the following summary by Davenport and Prusak (1998) stressed the different types of knowledge that might exist in an organisation and which could not be captured solely in a database:

Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, expert insight and grounded intuition that provides an environment and framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organisations it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organisational routines, processes, practices and norms. (p.5)

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, pp.8–14) add to the above definition by clarifying the following:

- Knowledge lives in the human act of knowing. The knowledge of experts such as surgeons is an accumulation of experience that remains dynamic: part of their ongoing experience. Communities of Practice make knowledge an integral part of their activities

and interactions, and they serve as a living repository for that knowledge.

- Knowledge is tacit as well as explicit. Not everything we know can be codified as documents or tools. In business, tacit knowledge, such as a deep understanding of the complex systems in an industry or in VET, is sometimes more valuable than explicit knowledge. Sharing tacit knowledge involves interaction and informal learning processes such as storytelling and coaching of the kind that Communities of Practice provide.
- Knowledge is social as well as individual. A body of knowledge, say about the NTF, is developed through communal involvement, not just from reading documents.
- Knowledge is dynamic. What makes knowledge management a challenge is that knowledge is not static: it is not an object that can be stored, owned and moved around like a document. Knowledge resides in the skills, understanding and relationships of its members as well as in tools, documents and processes.

If one accepts such a multi-layered definition of knowledge, 'managing' such different types of knowledge requires a new response by managers. Both individuals and organisations within VET will benefit if managers encourage staff to collaborate and share their knowledge with their peers and across the organisation. The structure of a Community of Practice provides an ideal platform for such sharing of knowledge.

Following is an analysis of the knowledge management aspects of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice, using the above theory as reference points.

Knowledge management aspects of the 2001 VET communities

The discussion below shows that the convenors and facilitators of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice were aware of the value of Communities of Practice in capturing the tacit and explicit knowledge of the participants.

Capturing, sharing and imparting knowledge

The convenor of the NSW Staff Development Managers' Network commented that 'If knowledge management is also seen as the sharing and imparting of knowledge in the workplace, a Community of Practice is an ideal vehicle for this to happen'. (NSW Staff Development Managers' Network Final Report)

The convenor of the WA Assessors' Network commented that:

It has been widely recognised that some of the most critical knowledge is held in the heads of the people working in an organisation and opportunities are lost due to others in the organisations not being aware of that knowledge. Within the Community of Practice an environment was created to support the sharing of understandings, and the sharing and developing of new knowledge. (WA Assessors' Network Final Report)

The Print and Graphic Arts community was aware of the value of knowledge management to its members:

We developed an effective knowledge management system to increase the value offered to individual participants, i.e., by sustaining the value of and sharing knowledge between face-to-face meetings; by broadening the knowledge beyond the immediate group of participants; and by capturing the knowledge for future use by others. (Print and Graphic Arts Final Report)

Capturing knowledge of process as well as content

The Queensland Health Training Package community was conscious that its knowledge of process issues as well as content of the Training Package needed to be captured:

Knowledge management was identified as an important outcome for the participants in this

group. Participants were very aware that the knowledge and expertise sharing that occurred created savings for their organisations. Comments were made about 'not re-inventing the wheel'. This applied both to process issues as well as the content of the package. (Queensland Health Training Package Final Report)

Linking knowledge management, Communities of Practice and the NTF

The direct links between knowledge management, Communities of Practice and the NTF were made by the Equal Voices West Coast community:

As a Community of Practice, *Equal Voices* has provided a platform for engaging members to:

Explore the literature on gender equity issues – this is a work in progress, and will involve connecting with researchers and practitioners in the field to develop strategies for enhancing gender equity in the VET sector.

Develop a clearer understanding of the overall objectives of the NTF and undertake a detailed consideration of the 12 AQTF Standards and identify the changes that will be required across various functions in the College.

Share their experience of gender equity issues and changes in the roles and responsibilities of VET professionals and the VET sector generally.

Connect with other professional and women's groups who are conducting research into gender issues related to management and leadership. (Equal Voices West Coast Final Report)

In relation to the implementation of the NTF, the Murray Institute Wine Industry Community of Practice was involved in knowledge management in the following ways:

Sharing of knowledge and insights in related industry areas

Sharing common experiences and developing partnerships

Use of knowledge to increase effectiveness, efficiency and innovation. (Murray Institute Wine Industry Final Report)

VET consists of many different bodies and relationships. The convenor of the National ITAB Workplace Communications community was aware of the importance of relationships formed by community members:

Our Community of Practice gave us the opportunity to learn from each other in what is normally not a learning environment. The knowledge gained by each participant then impacted upon the workings of their individual ITAB, thus creating a 'ripple effect' throughout the ITAB community (industry and training providers). Members also formed relationships with members from ANTA, DETYA, Reframing the Future and ACAL. These relationships have added to the richness of learning and the process of knowledge management. (National ITAB Workplace Communications Final Report)

Informing policy with field knowledge

Some Communities of Practice have existed for many years in pockets of VET and their members implicitly understand that knowledge management is, in part, about members of organisations providing advice and strategies, in this case to the VET system:

The knowledge management aspect of the National Horticulture Providers Network has been our core business for many years. As changes have occurred in Horticulture training such as the introduction of National Curriculum, the Horticulture Training Package and lately the Training Package review, this national voluntary group has participated in an advisory

capacity and as the major agent of change. It has cooperated with and advised RTCA and provided advice and strategies, through its state representatives, on a wide range of issues relating to delivery and assessment for the Horticulture Training Package. This Network will continue this type of work as long as there are issues that need resolving in the area of Horticulture training. (National Horticulture Providers Network Final Report)

Transferring knowledge between programs

The Institute of TAFE Tasmania has agreed that its community would continue as a knowledge management strategy within the organisation, benefitting from the transfer of knowledge between programs.

The face-to-face meetings provided a forum for sharing and developing knowledge. This was a benefit that the participants identified and valued. It is planned to continue the Community of Practice as a knowledge management strategy. In particular the transfer of knowledge between programs has been a significant outcome. (Institute of TAFE Tasmania Final Report)

Storing sensitive knowledge

The Printing and Graphic Arts Community of Practice admitted that it is not easy to overlay a knowledge management strategy on an existing group, as members may feel inhibited in future interactions:

The identification and application of knowledge management strategies was one of the most challenging tasks for the Community of Practice. One of the positive dimensions to the Printing and Graphic Arts Community of Practice is that most of the participants have, over a long period of time, developed a great deal of respect and understanding for each other and the particular circumstance in which they operate. This complex and supportive environment lends itself to the sharing of candid and personal experiences and perspectives. For the participants, this frank, honest, and personal sharing of experiences is one of the most valued dimensions of the community. The way in which these perspectives, strategies or experiences are 'stored' or 'shared' needs to be considered so as not to stifle or inhibit the contributions for fear of being taken out of context or misinterpreted 'out of session'. (Printing and Graphic Arts Final Report)

Using networks and corporate memory management

The SA Public Service Human Resource Managers Community of Practice found that Communities of Practice are important to the human resource development and knowledge management for the South Australian public sector for the following reasons:

With higher levels of turnover in staff in the public sector currently and in the future (Case, 2001), it is vital to find alternative means to document, manage and retain the explicit and implicit knowledge within and across sectors of the government.

Digital records can assist the process of managing knowledge, but a fabric of organisational networks and corporate memory management is also required.

Working across sectors and disciplines is necessary to achieve integrated solutions. This requires matrix team approaches to design, plan and implement policy to address the complex, interrelated social challenges we faced currently and in the future. (SA Public Service Final Report)

Concluding comment

The VET professionals quoted in this chapter are clear that 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 multiple and complex

ways. (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.15). As Communities of Practice are an essential aspect of knowledge management, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002, p.12) argue that organisations need to cultivate Communities of Practice actively and systematically, for their benefit 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, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.13)

The implications of such research findings for VET are profound. 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 NTF implementation benefit from the improved professional relationships and shared understandings between the VET and industry personnel who participate in the communities.

What were the critical success factors for the Communities of Practice?

This chapter compares the critical success factors for community development within the VET 2001 Communities of Practice with factors identified in the literature.

Key points

The key points made in this chapter include the following:

1. McDermott and other theorists provide useful benchmarks for analysing the performance of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice. The benchmarks include 'creating forums for thinking as well as systems for sharing information' and 'creating real dialogue about cutting edge issues'.
2. In their self-evaluations, the 2001 VET communities identified critical success factors that aligned with McDermott's list. VET communities also identified a number of variations to McDermott's list that were critical to their success. For instance, McDermott talks about building on the core values of the organisation, whereas some VET professionals are sessional or part-time staff and do not have one organisation as their focal point. The convenor of the Queensland Health Training Package Community of Practice found that the part-time staff in her community were driven by the shared, core value of their professional commitment to their students and industry.

Factors identified in the literature

Earlier chapters of this report identified a number of critical success factors for the effective growth of Communities of Practice, based on the work of the theorists (e.g. Wenger, 1998b; Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002), including:

- defining the fundamental building blocks of each community—a domain of knowledge; community; and practice
- assisting communities to move through stages of development by providing sufficient organisational support
- performing the critical roles of convenors and facilitators at each stage of the community's development, particularly in establishing a climate of trust and a means for communication
- appointing community members to perform core roles such as subject matter expert, mentor, administrator and technologist.

In 'Knowing in Community: 10 Critical Success Factors in Building Communities of Practice', McDermott provides a concise list of ten factors that every community could use as a checklist.

Table 10.1: McDermott's critical success factors (<http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/knowing.shtml>)

Critical Success Factor	Comments
1. Focus on knowledge important to both the business and community members	To show that Communities of Practice are important, form them around topics at the heart of the business.
2. Find a well-respected community member to coordinate the community	People who care about the community hold communities together.
3. Make sure people have time and encouragement to participate	One of the great limiting factors of a community's effectiveness at sharing knowledge is the time people have to participate.
4. Build on the core values of the organisation	Cultures are hard to change. To make sharing knowledge acceptable and routine, build your community to fit your organisation's core cultural values.
5. Get key thought leaders involved	Getting respected thought leaders involved builds energy in the community.
6. Create forums for thinking as well as systems for sharing information	Build energy through the community interacting, particularly through physical events.
7. Build relationships between community members	Contact – and the social connection and obligation that comes with it – is a key to ongoing community success.
8. Develop an active, passionate core group	Participation in communities varies: most have a core group of high contributors, a large group of 'lurkers' who listen but add little, and a larger group of peripheral members who only participate occasionally.
9. Make it easy to contribute to and access the community's knowledge and practices	Communication software should make it easy for community members to connect with each other, contribute to and use information from the community's knowledge base.
10. Create real dialogue about cutting edge issues	Trust needs to be built with the whole group, before the community can discuss assumptions.

McDermott's list provides useful benchmarks for analysing the performance of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice.

Critical success factors for the 2001 VET communities

Collectively, the 2001 VET communities identified critical success factors that aligned with McDermott's list. However, the discussion below shows that the VET communities also identified a number of variations to McDermott's list that were critical to their success. For instance, McDermott talks about building on the core values of the organisation, whereas some VET professionals are sessional or part-time staff and do not have one organisation as their focal point. The convenor of the Queensland Health Training Package Community of Practice found that the part-time staff in her community were driven by shared, core values relating to their professional field, health training.

Focus on knowledge important to both the business and community members

McDermott recommends that communities be formed around topics at the heart of the business. Centrelink's corporate interest in 'Recognition' issues within the NTF matched the interest of the members of Centrelink's Community of Practice. The group developed an agency-wide response to recognition of competencies currently held by employees, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. This compatibility between the corporate and members' interests ensured that Centrelink's Community of Practice was able to build on existing relationships within the organisation and to tap into management support. Their critical success factors included:

Huge enthusiasm of learning managers and coordinators

Tight focus on the desired project outcome (Policy and process around Recognition)

High level organisational support for the project

Existing network to start with

Personal support processes and networking methods were well developed within the existing group. (Centrelink Final Report)

Find a well-respected community member to coordinate the community

The NSW Staff Development Managers' community, like a number of the 2001 VET communities, engaged an expert facilitator to guide them through their learning:

Having expert facilitation, initially to set up the group in our first face-to-face meeting, helped people to engage in some reflection about their own learning. Marg Dix encouraged the members to keep their own learning journals, even if they were just a few thoughts. While we all know we should, we rarely do this so it was good to have to practise what we preach. (NSW Staff Development Managers' Final Report)

Make sure people have time and encouragement to participate

The funding requirements of the Reframing the Future sub-program were a key to the success of the Print and Graphic Arts Community of Practice. Reframing the Future required some structure in that the Community of Practice was to be targeted at implementing the NTF, but Reframing the Future provided the community with enough licence to pursue NTF issues in its own way. The ANTA funding gave personnel the time and the encouragement to participate in the sub-program, as well as giving the community public legitimacy and ensuring management support. The critical success factors for the Print and Graphic Arts Community of Practice included:

Not having too many strings attached to funding – enabling participants the ability to focus on what was immediately important to them and not on 'artificial activities' required in justification/reporting of expenditure.

Having an early face-to-face meeting to develop personal relationships. Having the funding to host face-to-face meetings. Some States have very little if any discretionary funds to travel interstate. When funding is provided by outside sources, Institutes tend to be more flexible in granting permission for interstate travel. The face-to-face meetings are very effective in establishing trust and respect, characteristics critical for the development of our Community of Practice.

Having a shared sense of purpose. All participants valued the opportunity for participation in the Community of Practice. This circumstance was preferable to participants being 'encouraged to participate' by their senior managers.

Participants having either the authority or support from their management to participate in the activity without the need to justify expenditure/time commitment – the very fact that ANTA recognised the activity as legitimate was beneficial in justification of involvement.

A balance between informal and formal activity. (Print and Graphic Arts Final Report)

Build on the core values of the organisation

The participants in the Queensland Health Training Package community were mostly part-time staff, who often did not identify with one local RTO. The following description by the facilitator suggests that the part-time staff feel passionately about their field of health training and the new Training Package. A core value of these VET part-time staff is to develop 'a consistent and coherent appearance to students and to the industry'. This is an important insight into the culture and professionalism of part-time VET teaching staff:

Perhaps the greatest critical success factor for this group was their enthusiasm and openness to collaboration and the ideas of others. As mentioned previously, there are few full-time staff in institutes in the health sector, and the participants who attended were 'thirsty' for knowledge about the new package. They recognised the implementation of the package as a major change that they would all face, and saw that common sense of purpose that drew them together. While management supported their attendance, and the project funded their travel, most organised themselves to get to the venue(s), and attended in their own time.

The participants were very keen to make meaning from the skeletal drafts of the Training Package that they had managed to obtain. They wanted to share their ideas, their problems and their issues. They were desirous of developing a consistent and coherent appearance to students and to the industry. They were hopeful that they might be able to make the most of their limited resources by sharing tasks across the system. (Qld Health Training Package Final Report)

Get key thought leaders involved

Many of the VET 2001 Communities of Practice invited guest speakers to their meetings. On some occasions the guest speakers addressed topics and issues of concern to the members; on other occasions the guests addressed the concept of community building. An example of accessing a guest speaker was provided by the Institute of TAFE Tasmania who brought in from Canberra Institute of Technology a national expert on the topic of assessment in VET, Berwyn Clayton.

Some teams included key external personnel in their community. For instance, the Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry project involved the regional tourism representative for the WA Government, Mr Noel Parkin, who was an important resource for information and a key contact for all participants.

The communities also valued visits and contact from the Reframing the Future's National Project Director and the evaluator who explained the concept of Communities of Practice and the rationale behind the sub-program.

Create forums for thinking as well as systems for sharing information

Critical success factors for the RMIT Community of Practice mostly revolved around finding a balance between members feeling comfortable to share (systems for sharing information) and members being willing to think critically about the issues (forums for thinking):

Reflecting upon the experience of our community, a number of critical success factors emerge including:

the need to be flexible and practical in your approach to facilitation and providing a focus, i.e. finding the balance between structure and freedom to think and act

setting up a climate of trust and safety around risk taking

encouraging and facilitating critical thinking, open debate and reflective practice

setting up of processes to spread/gain access to the community's knowledge and expertise, eg, developing smaller communities in teaching departments that act as a conduit. (RMIT Final Report)

Build relationships between community members

All of the 2001 VET communities placed an emphasis on building relationships between members. In the case of the NSW Staff Development Managers' network, the key was a 'two-day lock-up':

A critical success factor was the chance to get together for a two-day lockup that would not have been possible without the funding provided by this project. This added time together without the usual pressures of having to talk business, plus with a couple of extra officers who are not normally part of the group made for a quite different atmosphere and focus. (NSW Staff Development Managers' Final Report)

Develop an active, passionate core group

The convenors and facilitators of the VET 2001 communities used their judgement and a range of strategies to develop an active, passionate group of members. For example, the National ITAB Workplace Communication community felt that the way the community was formed, managed and allowed to actively define itself was pivotal. Its critical success factors included:

The inclusive nature of the Community of Practice – all members are invited to attend meetings, have input to reports and other documentation and are emailed minutes of the meetings, regardless of whether they have attended meetings or not. The community recognises and respects the constraints under which members work and aims to be supportive at all times.

The fact that early on the network members decided to define the role of the network, its mission, vision, values etc.

The strategic way in which face-to-face meetings were planned to coincide with other conferences and forums, to save funds and also to expose members to more than one event.

The support given to new members or members who did not have a background in the area of workplace communication.

To allow the group to evolve and to discuss issues which members perceived as important to themselves as well as to their industry area. (National ITAB Workplace Communication Final Report)

Make it easy to contribute to and access the community's knowledge and practices

The facilitator of the WA Assessors' Network found that the critical success factors for her large, state-wide group were largely related to providing a range of communication media:

Provide time and space for the communities to interact (social environment important)

Build physical and electronic playing fields of practice

Communication, ensure all participants are well informed, but provide information in small chunks so people don't get overwhelmed

Encourage communities to drive the agenda, to elect individuals to lead the community (similar to how amateur clubs elect office bearers)

Provide alternative platforms that enable sharing of issues, ideas, resources etc. (WA Assessors' Network Final Report)

For the convenor of the Barrier Reef Community of Practice, the funding for the Community of Practice project enabled the development of a 'distributed system', where the knowledge and productivity could be 'distributed across teams and units and their accompanying technologies':

Prior to the establishment of the Community of Practice, the IETC was working across a geographically dispersed community in the Northern region of Queensland. This encompasses 8 campuses covering an area of 145,290 square kilometres or 9% of the total surface area of Queensland. This is still the case of course, however, with the introduction of the Community of Practice a distributed system is developing.

A distributed system is one where the knowledge and productivity should be distributed across teams and units and their accompanying technologies. This works best for sharing both human and physical resources and seemed to be the core to the success of the IETC. It has been making the network explicit, bringing the participants out through the reciprocal mentoring process, reinforcing the trust between the workers and keeping the group focused on a common understanding of 'moving education forward for indigenous learners' where the Community of Practice has been founded. (Barrier Reef Network Final Report)

Create real dialogue about cutting edge issues

The Equal Voices West Coast College community found two sets of cutting edge issues provided cohesion for them—gender equity issues and concerns about the AQTF:

As a Community of Practice of women, gender equity issues associated with communication, leadership and management styles were identified as issues of common concern and interest to members. These issues provided the impetus for the establishment of the Community of Practice.

In considering the 12 AQTF Standards and how they will impact on individual roles/responsibilities and the College as a whole, members perceived that AQTF implementation would support necessary changes in the VET sector and enhance their professional input. They were therefore keen to see it was properly implemented. (Equal Voices West Coast College Final Report)

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Concluding comment

The critical success factors differed among the VET 2001 Communities of Practice. Some communities such as the RMIT group placed an emphasis on creating trust between members so that members would engage in critical analysis. Other communities such as the WA Assessors' Network placed an emphasis on creating a range of different platforms for communication to occur. Alternatively, the Barrier Reef Community of Practice needed to devise a new system for communication, a 'distributed system', for the sharing of knowledge across teams, between cultural groups and via different technologies.

While this diversity of contexts is a feature of VET, at the heart of all of the 2001 communities was the human engagement and negotiation around core issues of the NTF: resources, relationships, meanings and a range of professional judgments about pedagogical issues. Communities of Practice are a versatile, flexible space for such human engagement.

How can Communities of Practice be sustained?

This chapter compares the future intentions of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice with the theory about how Communities of Practice can be sustained.

Key points

Key points made in this chapter include:

1. Theorists suggest that Communities of Practice can be sustained through to a mature stage, once a community has demonstrated its value to both members and the organisation. At the mature stage of development, a range of pro-active steps can be taken by convenors of communities, to ensure community development.
2. Most, if not all, the 2001 VET communities did not reach a mature stage by the end of their four months of funded activity. Many reached the crucial point where their organisation now needs to confirm that they value the community sufficiently to keep supporting its existence. A few communities have already received organisational patronage allowing them to continue.
3. For VET communities to be sustained up to and beyond a maturing stage, increased appreciation is needed in VET of the value of Communities of Practice.

Theoretical steps

Chapter four examined the concrete strategies that convenors can use in the first three stages of community development, as defined by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). The next three stages relate to sustaining the initiative and are defined as:

- **Maturing stage.** During this stage of a community's development, the main issue it faces shifts from establishing value to clarifying the community's focus, role and boundaries. Once a community has demonstrated its viability and value, it might grow rapidly. Maturation is a very active stage for community coordinators and support staff.
- **Stewardship stage.** 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 organisation. Stewardship is needed to guide a mature community when it regularly experiences tension between developing its own tools, methods and approaches and being open to new ideas and members.
- **Transformation stage.** The radical transformation or death of a community is just as natural as its birth, growth and life. Even the healthiest communities can come to an end, if changes occur in the market or in the organisation or with technology. Community leaders need to exercise judgement as to when and how to either transform a community or allow it to end. (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

Set out in Table 11.1 below is a summary of the steps in typical work plans that convenors can use at each in the fourth, fifth and sixth stages of development of Communities of Practice, based on the research of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002).

Table 11.1: Typical Work Plans for convenors in each of the fourth, fifth and sixth stages of development of Communities of Practice (from Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002)

Maturing Stage	Stewardship Stage	Transformation Stage
Identify gaps in knowledge and develop a learning agenda	Institutionalise the voice of the community	Sometimes ailing communities are rejuvenated, because they still have some value to offer members.
Define the community's role in the organisation	Rejuvenate the community	Sometimes communities are allowed to fade away, losing members and energy.
Redefine community boundaries	Hold a renewal workshop	Sometimes communities die by becoming social clubs.
Routinise entry requirements and processes	Actively recruit new people to the core group	Sometimes communities split into distinct new communities or merge with others.
Measure the value of the community	Develop new leadership	Sometimes communities require so many resources they become institutionalised as centres of excellence or new departments.
Maintain a cutting-edge focus	Mentor new members	
Build and organise a knowledge repository	Seek relationships and benchmarks outside the organisation	

The intentions of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice will now be evaluated in terms of the concepts provided by the theorists cited above.

Ideas for sustaining the 2001 VET communities

Convenors and facilitators of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice were asked their views about how they would sustain their communities. A sample of their views set out below suggests that they are aware of some, but not all, of the strategies suggested by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). This is not surprising, as Communities of Practice are new to the majority of personnel in VET and the communities that participated in the 2001 sub-program of Reframing the Future only had four months to conduct activities. As noted in Chapter Four of this report, while most of the 2001 communities felt that they had reached the third, 'active', stage of development, some only reached stage one ('potential') or stage two ('coalescing').

Many of the convenors' responses to the question about how their communities can be sustained refer to two activities from the maturing stage of a community, from Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002): the ongoing need to define the community's role in the organisation and measuring the value of the community. For many of the 2001 convenors, measuring the value of the community is based mostly on whether the organisation agrees to continue funding the community. The way these two concerns are expressed below, indicates that many of their communities have only partially reached the maturing stage. In a few cases, the relevant organisations have taken the decision to support their Community of Practice, so it can move to the maturing stage.

Win management support

The Equal Voices West Coast College convenor acknowledged that the future of its community is reliant on many factors, including ongoing commitment from members and recognition of the value of the community by management:

An important ingredient for sustainability is support. Community members and College Management alike have expressed an interest in the continuation of *Equal Voices* beyond the project completion date.

This in-principle support will need to be translated into action. From members, this means a commitment to participate in and keep the community alive and relevant to their needs and aspirations. From the College, there needs to be recognition of the value of the forum as a knowledge management and problem-solving tool, a valuable professional development activity and a potential source of innovation. There also needs to be some financial support to sustain the community.

Leadership/management of the community will need to shift from being project managed to one that is genuinely drawn from and shared by community members. At the last meeting, members agreed that leadership would occur by rotation of responsibilities and sharing in the hosting of the community's activities on different campuses. (Equal Voices West Coast College Final Report)

The convenor of the Murray Institute Wine Industry community emphasised the need for the community to appreciate the value of sharing, if the community is to survive:

The community will need to feel that their involvement is reaping practical benefits for them. Supervisors and managers need to communicate that sharing information and knowledge is worthwhile and valued. (Murray Institute Wine Industry Final Report)

Gain corporate sponsors

A number of convenors of the 2001 VET communities are in positions of authority within their organisations, allowing them to be definite that the organisation will sustain the innovation. For example, the Centrelink convenor commented:

There is no doubt the Community of Practice will continue. Management of the Centrelink Virtual College acknowledges that the Community of Practice is an important tool in the development of the Centrelink Virtual College's business objectives.

In 2002 we will need to provide assistance to facilitate the operation of the community. This will need to be in the way of assistance to attend meetings and conferences, the arranging of guest speakers and the facilitation of newsletters and other forum.

We are in the process of relaunching the Centrelink Virtual College website and have asked if there is interest in an assessor network chat page. (Centrelink Final Report)

Similarly the convenor of the Institute of TAFE Tasmania community expressed corporate support for maintaining the community:

There is now considerable pressure from the participants to continue the Community of Practice. Staff development funds within the Institute will be allocated to fund a facilitator and provide for face-to-face meetings.

The General Manager, Business Improvement, will continue to sponsor the Community of Practice. In addition, a "core group" is expected to emerge as the drivers with fluctuating involvement of a wider group. (Institute of TAFE Tasmania Final Report)

Define the community's role in the organisation

Other convenors of the 2001 VET communities are not in positions of authority that enable them to assure the future of their communities. The convenor of the Queensland Health Training Package community considered a number of different organisational pathways for her community, once the Reframing the Future funding ceased:

Our Community of Practice is determined to continue. We shall seek support of the TAFE Queensland network to sponsor the group into being recognised as a SPIG- A Strategic Product Implementation Group. Members are not certain that this is their preferred avenue but this formality will recognise and support the involvement of the members. A SPIG is supported by the TAFE network by providing a small amount of funding for tele/videoconferences and some administration support. If the group is not supported as a SPIG, the members will become part of a Working Group which is sustained by the institutes themselves, less formally. (Queensland Health Training Package Final Report)

For some communities, defining the community's role in the organisation is still unresolved. The convener of the RMIT community captured this ongoing tension and debate in her Final Report:

The key to sustenance for our community will be around managing competing tensions and drivers, eg, University directions versus local needs, wants and desires. There will be some more time to coalesce around new potentials and for looking at more flexible kinds of participation, which might mean a more fluid or rotating membership. As the convener, I suspect it will be sustained for as long as it remains relevant and connected to local experience. (RMIT Final Report)

These types of organisational debates indicate that the RMIT community is not yet at the maturing stage, along with almost all, if not all, the other communities from the 2001 sub-program.

Define the community's role in the VET system

The National ITAB Workplace Communication community is also seeking organisational commitment from each of the ITABs—a complex undertaking, as so many organisations are involved:

One of the main factors impacting upon the issue of the Community of Practice continuing is the need for its existence. As long as there are people within the national ITABs that require PD in this area and that want to further the National Training Framework by addressing workplace communication issues, there will be reason to sustain it.

Sustaining the Community of Practice will depend upon continued support from ITABs, in some cases by articulating this support into ITAB Strategic Plans.

Goodwill on behalf of ITABs is needed to pick up the cost for sending a staff member to meetings – up to 6 a year, travel & accommodation, costing for guest speakers, venue hire if needed, cost for catering and time for the establishment and management of a website. (National ITAB Workplace Communication Final Report)

The National Horticulture Providers Network is confident it will continue as a community for many years, bound together by common interests and a passion for the field of horticulture. However, lack of funding and continuing management support could curtail its success:

There is no doubt that this Community of Practice will continue for many years to come. It has existed as the National Horticulture Providers Network for many years and its core business has been change management in the area of Horticulture training delivery and assessment. Every change, no matter how subtle, at the national level must filter down to VET practitioner level and this group has always perceived its role as promoting positive outcomes and reducing confusion by sharing ideas and strategies to encourage a national approach to horticulture training. Its core business therefore is likely to be unchanged.

In the past the group has been sustained by its common goals and an informal and flexible nature that is welcoming of newcomers. Characteristic of all long-term participants is the enthusiasm they bring and the willingness to share ideas and solutions. These characteristics seem to transfer to the newcomers who have gradually replaced the older members of the group.

The major threat to the continuation of this Community of Practice is the difficulty of finding funding, particularly in provision of travel to the face-to-face meeting. Over the past couple of years several States have had no representation, mainly because of funding issues. This is sometimes exacerbated by attitudes of management holding the purse strings who do not see the value of Community of Practice activities to college business. The funding provided by this project supported the travel from every state and was one of the reasons that the project was able to succeed. (National Horticulture Providers Network Final Report)

Identify the value for members

The convener of the Print and Graphic Arts community identified three factors critical to the long-term growth of the community—a driver; continued value to members; and continued support from ANTA and senior management:

A driver. This project had a convener appointed to drive the activities. Even though all participants value the opportunity to participate in a Community of Practice the responsibility of 'holding it all together' is time consuming and requires some resourcing. The administration requires coordinating venues, travel, teleconferences, meeting minutes, etc. The convener may also have to 'push' where/when required to ensure the long term benefits to the community are not moved down individual participants' agendas. The community believes that continuing to have a driver /convener will be critical to its sustainability.

Continued value to community members. The original network and evolving Community of Practice must continue to be of relevance and offer value to members if it is to continue into the future. At present it seems the evolving nature of the VET environment will continue to offer challenges to individuals and organisations operating within that environment. The value that participation in a Community of Practice brings to professionals and organisations through the sharing of ideas and experiences suggests that it will be sustained, at least, into the immediate future.

Continued support from ANTA and senior management. The legitimisation of the activity through the Reframing the Future project has made participation easier for community members. This project has added significantly to the original network and subsequently to the broadening of the value to individuals and organisations across Australia. The funding enabled the broadening of participants to include a truly national community. Even with the adoption of more economical communication tools (telephones/email) the community will require occasional face-to-face meetings (every 9 – 12 months would be ideal). Given some participants will have difficulty justifying expenses and that some States have significant travel costs, funding support for travel will be necessary to maintain the participation levels as experienced in the pilot project. (Print and Graphic Arts Final Report)

Routinise processes

The Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry project resulted in the facilitator developing a partially-completed model that could be used in the future. The model places an emphasis on identifying value for members and routinising processes:

A model for developing a Community of Practice that can be used by other training organisations has not been fully developed or successfully applied. This Community is in very formative stages and as mentioned there is a high level of optimism in it developing further. The industry in this region is characterised by a number of specific factors that may or may not be unique to the region, i.e. remote, geographically vast, seasonal, dominated by small business, low emphasis placed on training, low levels of capitalisation outside of land and buildings,

Based on the work completed to date and listening to participants comment and feedback, I envisage the finished model for this region would be:

1. Make contact with all park operators within the region
2. Arrange a workshop with a small number of keynote speakers focussing on industry, training and networks (Communities of Practice). The level of training language would need to be consistent with the groups knowledge and would need to focus on benefits and how it can be conducted with minimum impact on the time required to conduct business activities.
3. Identify a coordinator to “kick start” the community. This could be an industry person or VET representative. Realistically it would be a VET representative.
4. Gather information about each workshop participant and from other operators that have an interest in being involved
5. Develop this information into an informal newsletter that would be distributed to all operators and used as an introductory tool to welcome participants into the Community.
6. The coordinator would maintain regular contact with all participants and would need to provide “snippets” of news, either about the industry, tourism or what’s happening with other operators. There needs to be a strong focus in creating dialogue amongst operators and this can be achieved by asking people what issues they have and putting this to the group who then start creating their own dialogue.
7. All success stories, such as economic successes, marketing achievements, accreditation and certification achievements etc., should be communicated to all participants.
8. To sustain the community there does need to be a central point of focus and over time I would suggest this would shift to the tourism representative in the region. The combination of marketing successes, an increase in industry standards, professional and social benefits, etc., would ensure the continuation of the Community, however, I feel that sustainability would be dependent on some central point of coordination or focus.
(Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry Final Report)

Concluding comment

Most of the 2001 VET Communities of Practice did not attain a stage of maturity after four months of existence. If a VET organisation supports a Community of Practice through its initial stages, it may be missing out on the major return on its investment by not supporting communities as they move into a mature stage. Lesser & Prusak (2000) suggest that managers seeking to increase the level of social capital in the organisation, via Communities of Practice, should consider the following rules of thumb:

- Identify Communities of Practice that influence critical goals within the organisation
- Provide Communities of Practice with the means to meet face-to-face
- Provide tools that enable the community to identify new members and maintain contact with existing members
- Identify key ‘experts’ within the community and enable them to provide support to the larger group
- Remember that the capital, in social capital, implies an investment model with an expected return. (pp.129–130)

Future VET Communities of Practice that have sufficient time and funding to progress to the third ‘maturing’, stage of development and to subsequent stages, will benefit from an awareness of the concepts and convenors’ strategies advocated by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). Communities of Practice deserve to be seen as more than episodic experiments: VET will be the richer from sustaining communities, where they continue to add value to members’ professional work and to the members’ organisations.

What are the limitations and potential of Communities of Practice for VET?

This chapter discusses the limitations and potential of Communities of Practice for VET, in terms of implementing the NTF.

Key points

Key points made in this chapter include:

1. Communities of Practice have limitations because they are difficult to establish and maintain; they can easily develop flaws or experience pitfalls; they add to the complexity of modern organisations more than any other knowledge-based approaches; and they increase the difficulties of managing organisations.
2. Communities of Practice help to develop the appropriate connections, relationships and context that allow knowledge to flow between those who have knowledge and those who require it. (Lesser and Everest, 2001). This flow of knowledge is essential if the National Training Framework is to be implemented optimally.
3. More research is required of VET Communities of Practice that move to a point of maturity, where members move beyond exchanging tips and ideas to developing and recording a body of knowledge about implementing the NTF. More research could also be conducted into the links between knowledge management, social capital, Communities of Practice and organisational change, in the context of RTOs implementing the NTF.

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Limitations

Possible pitfalls and potential flaws of Communities of Practice were discussed in Chapter Five of this report. Drawing on the research of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), the pitfalls include community members becoming arrogant, or being comfortable with their marginal position within the organisation; communities developing factions or cliques; communities suppressing an individual's creativity or communities becoming too dependent on a coordinator; and communities becoming so large that members feel disconnected or communities becoming too narrow in their views by concentrating on local issues.

This evaluation report points out that Communities of Practice are not easy to initiate, manage and sustain. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p.157) admit that because communities introduce a new level of complexity, they can test the limits of an organisation:

They contribute to organisational complexity more than other approaches to knowledge because they create multiple centres of power based on knowledge. Less centrality of power

entails more diversity and more stakeholders in forming the direction of the company—thus increased complexity in decision-making. Business strategy has to become the consensus of a more disparate group of people. Such a knowledge organisation is inherently more complex to manage than a traditional organisation. (p.158)

From an organisational point of view, this evaluation study shows that Communities of Practice are more difficult to relate to than work units or project teams; and more challenging to interact with than networks with more general agendas.

One of the convenors of the 2001 VET communities witnessed two characteristics of Communities of Practice—openness, and the consequent difficulty of managing openness:

It is within the Community of Practice that people are free to express and share some of their concerns, wishes, problems and practices in order to find solutions for their work practice. This has brought out an openness that I had not expected. Again, I must add that this is not without its problems. (Barrier Reef Final Report)

In summary, Communities of Practice have limitations because they are difficult to establish and maintain; they can easily develop flaws or experience pitfalls; they add to the complexity of modern organisations more than any other knowledge-based approaches; and they increase the difficulties of managing organisations.

The implications of these findings for VET are significant. Firstly, RTOs are advised not to support Communities of Practice unless they are aware of the flaws that communities can develop. Secondly, if RTOs do decide to support the development of Communities of Practice, they are advised to commit sufficient resources to support the communities, and to give the communities sufficient time to grow. Thirdly, if RTOs wish to gain optimum return on their investment in Communities of Practice, they are advised to ensure their managers engage fully with the communities, to appreciate the collaborative knowledge, expertise and creativity of the members.

Potential

Many comments about the potential of Communities of Practice are contained in other chapters of this report. The following, brief discussion provides some additional findings.

Within an organisational context, Communities of Practice are increasingly being recognised for their potential to play a key role in creating and disseminating knowledge. Communities of Practice are a new organisational form that encourages individuals to create, refine, share and use knowledge effectively (McDermott, 1999). In any environment where knowledge management is a key to organisational success, Lesser and Everest (2001) argue that Communities of Practice help to develop the appropriate connections, relationships and context that allow knowledge to flow between those who have knowledge and those who require it.

Underpinning the NTF

The flow of knowledge as a potential benefit of Communities of Practice is at the front of the minds of a range of the following convenors of the 2001 VET communities. They see Communities of Practice underpinning the growth of the National Training System, the major theme of this report:

Communities of Practice have the potential to help generate a more collaborative and cooperative culture in the VET sector. Communities of Practice of professionals with common interests across Colleges and States will enhance knowledge and expertise sharing and contribute to the overall implementation of an integrated National VET system. (Equal Voices West Coast College Final Report)

The Queensland Health Training Package community is seeking to use the Community of Practice framework to make more connections both within Queensland and interstate, in relation to the NTF and the building of a national system:

Our Community of Practice operates across the state. Members of this group have asked to meet to talk to other teachers in the health sector. This is because there are so many specialisations with few teachers even in a large state like Queensland. Members felt that they had much to gain by meeting with practitioners from other States in terms of resource sharing. They also felt the need to gain an understanding of the industry in other States as many of the sectors would have only a few employment opportunities for graduates. One of the aims of this group is to organise a national meeting of practitioners. (Queensland Health Training Package Final Report)

The facilitator of the Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry community believes that Communities of Practice can play a significant role in changing attitudes towards learning and training within this industry and region:

Overall I believe that Communities of Practice can be extremely useful in supporting the implementation of the National Training Framework. There have been ongoing significant changes to the VET system for a number of years now and I believe the opportunity for participants to discuss and explore new concepts and ideas, in what is essentially an informal forum, can assist in reducing the stress associated with change and benefit the transition process.

With this particular Community of Practice I believe the community can play a significant role in changing attitudes towards learning and training within this industry and region. It has the potential to be a tool for introducing and embracing VET within the industry. (Eastern Pilbara Caravan Industry Final Report)

Facilitating cross-industry and sector-based collaboration

The National ITAB Workplace Communications effectively operated across a number of ITABs and across a range of industries in Australia. Now the convenor sees potential for more cross-industry and sector-based Communities of Practice:

Communities of Practice could be established to work together in other cross-industry settings through the ITABs in areas such as technology and online learning, occupational health and safety and customer service. Within individual industries, sector groups could unite to look at common issues e.g. taxi councils from each state or national enterprises and their training providers from around the country could form a Community of Practice to ensure consistency in training provision. (National ITAB Workplace Communications Final Report)

Informing Training Package reviews

Reviews of Training Packages and teacher/workplace trainer communities would enhance the implementation of the NTF, in such areas as print and graphic arts and horticulture:

The use of a Community of Practice that spans RTOs and ITABs (across Australia) could drive and promote participation in the upcoming review of the Printing and Graphic Arts Training Package. This Community of Practice could also facilitate the more rapid implementation of the revised Training Package. The establishment of a 'TAFE teacher/ Workplace Trainer' Community of Practice would provide an excellent exchange of perspectives and skills across and between participants. (Print and Graphic Arts Final Report)

This project team is already working on forming other Communities of Practice based on the model of the National Horticulture Providers Network. The Conservation and Land Management Training Package is due for endorsement in early 2002 and some of the

Horticulture Providers' Network members plan to start a national network to assist with the implementation of this package. (National Horticulture Providers' Network Final Report)

The convenor of the Institute of TAFE Tasmania community predicts that future Communities of Practice in VET could support the strengthening of partnerships between industry and VET practitioners; the engagement of VET practitioners in influencing policy agendas; the wider dissemination of knowledge developed through individual staff development projects; and innovations in training. (Institute of TAFE Tasmania Final Report)

Positioning Australian VET at the leading edge

The convenor of the WA Assessors' Network believes that future Communities of Practice can be strategically aligned to enable Australia to develop a leading edge in vocational education and training:

Community of Practice has the potential to be the glue that brings the implementation and evaluation of the NTF together. Contrary to the popular literature available providing descriptors of Communities of Practice, evidence suggests there is a further unexplored dimension to Communities of Practice. The dimension is the emergence of strategic Communities of Practice, where the characteristics of a traditional Community of Practice can be applied, but need to be built on further to provide a mechanism that supports change management and contributes to Australia having a leading edge in Vocational Education and Training in the future. (WA Assessors' Network Final Report)

What new research could be undertaken

While this research study shows that Communities of Practice have considerable potential to reshape professional practice and to improve organisational productivity in VET, more research is required to understand the potential of communities. For instance, to further clarify the professional expertise of VET practitioners on display in communities, future evaluations could focus deliberately on measuring the value of Communities of Practice to the implementation of the National Training Framework.

One of the convenors of a 2001 VET community suggested the following ongoing research and collaborative activities:

There are lots of excellent models that have emerged from the FTF and Re FTF processes. I would like to see processes that encouraged:

Sharing of resources (databases would be great)

Assessor networks and databases.

Sharing of assessment instruments and expertise

Case studies of Communities of Practice that have worked well and made a difference

Communities of Practice that span the divide between the public, private and corporate RTO

Communities of Practice that focus on professional development across the RTO divides

A mainstreaming of the value of Communities of Practice and networks as legitimate professional Development tools. (Centrelink Final Report)

This evaluation report provides extensive information about how to establish and support a Community of Practice during its early stages. More research is required of communities that move to a point of maturity, where members move beyond exchanging tips and ideas to

developing and recording a body of knowledge about implementing the NTF. At this point in a community's development, expectations and strains increase:

Shifting from sharing tips to developing a comprehensive body of knowledge expands the demands on community members, both in time and in the scope of their interests. (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.97)

This evaluation study also shows that more research is needed of:

- the structure of VET Communities of Practice, in relation to the concepts of domain, community and practice
- the functions of convenors and facilitators during the mature and later stages of development
- the roles of core team members other than convenors and facilitators
- how VET Communities of Practice can be sustained.

More research could also be conducted of the links between Communities of Practice, knowledge management, staff skill-building and organisational capability, in the context of RTOs implementing the NTF. A possible addition to the list is social capital, defined by Cohen & Prusak (2001) as a company's stock of human connections such as trust, personal networks and a sense of community.

Concluding comment

Communities of Practice have limitations, which need to be heeded. They are difficult to form and to sustain and they can easily fall short of members' expectations. To realise the full potential of Communities of Practice within the NTF, substantial support is needed from coordinating organisations and high-order skills are required from convenors and facilitators.

This evaluation highlighted the value of the trust, goodwill, innovation, communication and sharing that underpins the VET system in Australia. Lesser and Storck (2001) note that 'communities are often hidden assets, appearing neither on an organisation chart nor on a balance sheet.' (p.833) The existing and emerging Communities of Practice within VET deserve public recognition as previously 'hidden assets', for their contribution to the ongoing construction of a multi-dimensioned national training system. Future Communities of Practice in VET have considerable potential to accelerate, intensify, enrich and enhance the implementation of the national training system.

Description of national project

Following is the initial project description for National Projects funding.

Establishing National VET Communities of Practice – building the capacity of VET practitioners to implement the National Training Framework.

(1) Project Objectives

The aim of this National Project is to identify through research and consultation, the processes for establishing VET Communities of Practice nationally and to document examples of good practice for dissemination.

This project will assist in formalising practice by analysing the theoretical framework for the establishment of VET Communities of Practice. The project will also engage practitioners in identifying what makes Communities of Practice successful and provide advice to those who intend to create communities of practice in their region, program or industry.

The outcomes of this project will assist in building the capacity of VET practitioners to achieve the objectives of the National Strategy, in particular Objective 1 – Equipping Australians for the world of work. Communities of Practice are an innovative strategy for building the skills of teachers and trainers to respond to client demands more quickly and effectively. (Young and Mitchell 2000)

Research by Young and Mitchell (2000) indicates that this national project would assist in achieving the following annual national priorities:

1. A quality national training system that provides value for money (learning networks are a cost effective mechanism for adding value to existing provider/industry relationships)
2. Industry commitment to skill development (learning communities enable practitioners to collaborate with industry to stimulate the uptake of training and to provide enhanced training solutions)
3. VET professionalism (learning communities provide a structured mechanism for professionals to interact with colleagues in horizontal groupings that stretch beyond their organisation, state/territory or industry)
4. Support for regional development (learning communities that use new information communication technologies can transcend the barriers of geography and demography).

(2) Background

Since 1997, Framing the Future has worked with people throughout the national VET sector to build the capacity of providers to implement the National Training Framework. Over this time over 20,000 participants have been involved in the over 500 workbased learning projects. One outcome of this activity has been the establishment of three different types of networked learning Communities of Practice. (Young and Mitchell 2000). The intent of the proposed

project is to move beyond Framing the Future project teams, and to identify and foster growth of Communities of Practice in the wider VET sector.

(3) Evaluation of prior project

This project builds on the findings of Mitchell (2000) *Re-framing the Future* report which noted that Framing the Future led to the creation of collaborative arrangements with industry and other providers. The intended project aims to extend the impact of this finding into new areas outside the Framing the Future project teams and to assist in building the capacity of the VET practitioners to implement the National Training Framework.

(4) Expected outcomes, outputs and related performance criteria and timing

Objective	Methodology	Outcomes Outputs	Performance Criteria
Analysis of theoretical framework for the establishment of communities of practice Identification of the attributes of successful Communities of Practice	Conduct an international literature review	Documentation on the theoretical underpinnings of Communities of Practice and attributes of successful Communities of Practice	A report produced
Documentation of the processes and practice underpinning Communities of Practice as one method of building the capacity of the VET practitioner to implement the National Training Framework	Written description of various success stories on Communities of Practice Documentation of what makes these Communities of Practice successful and how others embarking on their formation could proceed.	Documentation of the national examples of communities of practice, for dissemination to those who may be considering the establishment of same	A report containing five case studies of communities of practice throughout VET in Australia A report on the keys to success in the establishment of Communities of Practice
Development of an implementation and dissemination strategy for the project findings and outputs	Determine the communication approach for various parts of the VET sector. Document the dissemination plan.	Communication and information strategy finalised and operational.	A report detailing communication and dissemination strategy

Evaluator's brief

The consultant will identify through research and consultation, the processes for establishing VET Communities of Practice nationally and document for dissemination examples of good practice arising from five of the 2001 Networking projects.

The consultant will:

1. provide an extensive literature review on Communities of Practice to the participating networks, including an analysis of a theoretical framework for the establishment of *Communities of Practice*, the provision of a practical definition, and an identification of the attributes of successful *Communities of Practice*;
2. maintain regular contact with the program mentor and the ten 2001 networks, for formative evaluation purposes, to document the processes and practices underpinning effective *Communities of Practice*;
3. develop five case studies of the networks and document national examples of *Communities of Practice*, for dissemination to those who may be considering the establishment of the same;
4. maintain regular contact with the program mentor, for the joint development of a dissemination strategy for the project findings and the outputs;
5. produce a final evaluation report, summarising the above findings, which will inform directions and criteria for selection of projects in 2002 and, together with the mentor, a research paper for a VET conference.

One requirement of the consultant was the preparation of a theoretical framework for the establishment of Communities of Practice, the provision of a practical definition, and an identification of the attributes of successful Communities of Practice. To meet this requirement, a 28 page booklet was prepared prior to the commencement of the 16 pilot groups in August 2001, entitled 'Communities of Practice: Reshaping Professional Practice and Improving Organisational productivity in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) Sector. Resources for Practitioners.' (Mitchell, Wood and Young). The booklet is available at <http://reframingthefuture.net/publications.shtml>

Names of contacts

The evaluator, John Mitchell, and the mentor, Susan Young, wish to thank, for their support, the following VET personnel who were the main contacts in relation to the evaluation.

State/Territory	Coordinating Organisation	Main contact personnel
Australian Capital Territory	Centrelink	Anthony Tyrrel, Grace Franco
New South Wales	TAFE NSW Staff Development Managers' Network	Beth Robertson, Margaret Dix
New South Wales	ACE NSW Metropolitan Managers' community	Robyn Maher
Queensland	TAFE Queensland	Janine Schubert
Queensland	Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE	Julie Woodlock
South Australia/ national	Douglas Mawson Institute of Technology	Andrew McGowan
South Australia	Murray Institute of TAFE	Anne Dening
South Australia	SA DETE	Miriam Daley, Louise Waiblinger
Tasmania	Institute of TAFE Tasmania	Carol Ward
Victoria	National ITAB Workplace Communications Network	Cinthia Del Grosso
Victoria	RMIT	Cathy Down, Lisa Thompson-Gordon
Victoria	ACPET	Julie Moss
Western Australia	Professional and Career Development Unit - Dept of Training & Employment	Mariead Dempsey
Western Australia/ national	Challenger Institute of TAFE	Christine Cooper
Western Australia	Eastern Pilbara College of TAFE	Trish Jessop
Western Australia	West Coast College of TAFE	Renu Sharma, Lauri Grace, Pokua Asomani

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