Communities of Practice

and the

national training system

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core ideas

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. This was demonstrated by the sixteen Communities of Practice that participated in a Reframing the Future pilot program in 2001, each focusing on different aspects of implementing the national training system.

The report on the pilot program, *The potential for Communities of Practice to underpin the National Training Framework* (Mitchell, 2002), is available at www.reframingthefuture.net

The following set of core ideas is taken from the report and prepared by John Mitchell and Susan Young. The core ideas provide a quick overview of the concept of Communities of Practice in VET.

Implementing the national training system

The national training system involves, among other things, implementing 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 system is not simply a matter of delivering a training product: it requires providers to establish new and enduring relationships with industry clients. The national training system is also expanding and changing, evidenced by the introduction or updating of Training Packages and the introduction of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF).

Lessons from the 2001 VET Communities of Practice project show that communities can:

- focus attention on both relationship-building and on gaining an understanding of new or recently modified Training Packages

- deliver concrete, practical outputs, such as guides for compliance with AQTF standards

- focus on less tangible issues such as increasing members' confidence in managing the change from curriculum to Training Packages.

Characteristics

Communities of Practice are groups of staff bound together by common interests and a passion for a cause, and who interact on an ongoing basis. Communities are:

- sometimes formed within the one organisation, and sometimes across many organisations

- often informal, with fluctuating membership and people can belong to more than one community at a time

- different from formal work groups, project teams or informal networks, in emphasising the development of members' capabilities and the building and exchange of knowledge.

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 are:

> 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)

VET has many such informal groups, but many more could be fostered.

Benefits for individuals and organisations

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 by the one community.

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

- Communities of Practice enable employees to manage change

- they provide the practitioner with access to new knowledge

- they foster trust and a sense of common purpose in the individual

- 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'.

The organisational benefits of Communities of Practice include:

- the informal dissemination of valuable information
- improvements in productivity
- the fostering of innovation
- the reinforcement of strategic direction.

Structure

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) find that all Communities of Practice share a basic structure consisting of a combination of three fundamental elements – a domain of knowledge; community; and practice – as follows:

- *A domain of knowledge*, which creates common ground and a sense of common knowledge in the community.
- *A community* creates the social fabric of learning. A strong community fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust.
- *The practice* is a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that community member's share. (pp.27-29)

Communities of Practice in VET can cultivate these three elements of a domain of knowledge, a community and practice.

Facilitation

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:

- Identifying important issues in their domain
- Planning and facilitating community events
- Informally linking community members
- Fostering the development of community members
- Managing the boundary between the community and the formal organisation
- Helping build the practice, including the knowledge base, lessons learned, best practices, tools and methods
- Assessing the health of the community and evaluating its contributions to members and the organisation. (p.80)

Stages of growth

Communities of Practice are continually evolving and changing. In the following diagram Wenger (1998b) 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: Stages of development of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998b)
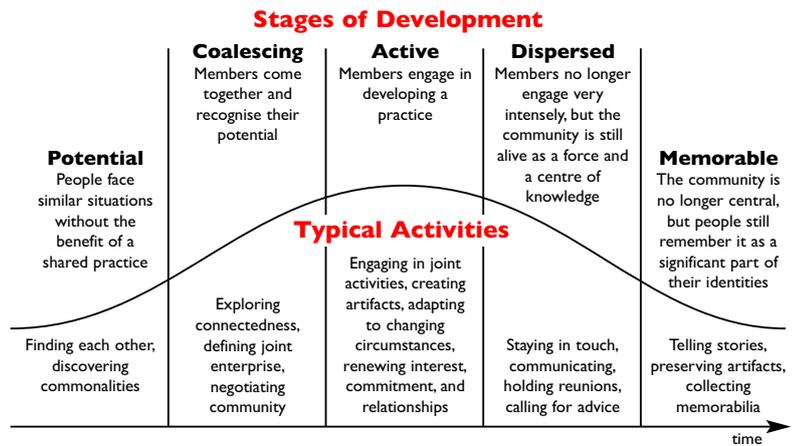
These stages of development set Communities of Practice apart from other types of organisational forms and structures, such as work groups or project teams. While all groups that meet on a regular basis move through Tuckman's famous pattern of forming, storming, norming and performing, Communities of Practice have their own growth characteristics.

Knowledge management

Knowledge management is the systematic processes by which knowledge needed for an organisation to succeed is created, captured, shared and leveraged. (Rumizen, 2002, p.9) Considerable knowledge management is needed to implement the national training system: for instance,

- knowledge about the training requirements of industry, enterprises and individuals
- knowledge about Training Packages
- knowledge about assessment strategies.

A body of knowledge about the national training system is developed through collegial interaction, not just from reading documents. Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, expert insight and grounded intuition (Davenport and Prusak, 1998), which the members of Communities of Practice can share and build. The structure of a Community of Practice provides an ideal platform for such sharing of knowledge

Social capital

When appropriately supported by their organisations, 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. Social capital is defined as:

- a company's stock of human connections such as trust, personal networks and a sense of community (Cohen & Prusak, 2001)

- the wealth that exists because of an individual's relationships. (Lesser, 2000)

The trusting relationships of VET practitioners, both within their organisation and externally, with industry and other stakeholders, add value to VET. Communities of Practice place these relationships at centre stage.

Limitations

If Communities of Practice are used to assist in the implementation of the national training system, they need to be supported well because communities

- are difficult to establish and maintain

- can easily develop flaws or experience pitfalls

- add to the complexity of modern organisations more than any other knowledge-based approaches

- increase the difficulties of managing organisations. (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002)

Potential

Communities of Practice have considerable potential 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 system is to be implemented optimally.

Communities of Practice can underpin the national training system by:

- highlighting the value of the trust, goodwill, innovation, communication and sharing within the VET system in Australia

- facilitating inter-organisational and cross-industry collaboration

- informing thinking in the field of VET about Training Packages, assessment and other fundamentals.

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.

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