

**EFFECTIVELY STRUCTURING
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN VET**

*Findings from an evaluation of 48 communities of practice
that were managed by Reframing the Future
and funded through the Australian National Training Authority in 2002*

JOHN MITCHELL

**Reframing
the
Future**

The logo for 'Reframing the Future' features the text 'Reframing the Future' in a bold, sans-serif font. 'Reframing' is in black, 'the' is in a smaller black font, and 'Future' is in red. A black swoosh underline is positioned beneath 'Future'. To the right of the text is a large, light purple sphere with a smaller, orange-to-red gradient sphere partially overlapping its bottom edge.

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Communities of practice are groups of people bound together by common interests and a passion for a cause, and who continually interact.

This report shows that effectively structured communities of practice can have significant impacts on the implementation of the national training system in the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

Focus of evaluation

The report presents findings from the evaluation of forty eight projects that were funded to form communities of practice in the VET sector in Australia in 2002, as part of the Reframing the Future program. Reframing the Future is the national staff development and change management program funded through the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). Reframing the Future is designed to support the implementation of a national training system that is industry-led, demand-driven and high-quality.

This report reviews the 2002 VET communities using the perspective provided by Wenger et al (2002) that all communities of practice share a three-part structure:

- *a domain of knowledge* which creates common ground and a sense of common knowledge in the community;
- *a community* which provides a sense of belonging and mutual commitment;
- and *practice* which provides a set of common approaches to problems.

Methods

The research for Reframing the Future was undertaken from May 2002 to March 2003 by John Mitchell from John Mitchell & Associates. The fieldwork was undertaken with the assistance of the National Project Director of Reframing the Future, Susan Young.

The research methods included observations at a national forum convened for the project convenors at the start of the project and a national conference at the conclusion; observations at workshops conducted for groups in different States and Territories at the mid-way point of the 2002 program; reviews of the project teams' action plans, mid-term progress reports and final reports; and observations from visits to a number of sites. A further discussion on methods used in this study is set out in Appendix 1.

Major findings

The major findings from this study are as follows.

Greater understanding of structure is required

As communities of practice are an important mechanism for facilitating collaboration in the implementation of a national training system, VET practitioners will benefit from an increased understanding of the underpinning structure of communities. Communities of practice funded in 2002 by Reframing the Future were encouraged to develop a greater understanding of the three fundamental structural elements of their communities – a domain of knowledge, community and practice. In particular, funded communities were asked to focus on the development of practice. This evaluation study reports on effective responses to structuring communities of practice by a sample of 2002 communities.

Extending the domain of knowledge

The initial domain of knowledge of many VET communities of practice commonly involves issues related to Training Packages, such as assessment and delivery, or the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), or industry-provider relationships. However, each community of practice will explore differently its domain of knowledge, affected by factors such as the Training Package involved and the profile of the industry and clients and providers.

Domains of knowledge can change during the life of a community of practice – especially under the guidance of an experienced facilitator – often becoming more relevant and providing increased value to the members of the community.

Community-building a necessity

Community-building is needed in VET to meet common challenges such as the distances between members of the same industry or the diversity of community membership. Community-building is not a luxury in the VET sector: it is a necessity.

Many facilitators in VET use a wide repertoire of community-building strategies to build relationships and to help members learn. Advanced community-building skills used by some VET facilitators include finding ways for members to communicate regularly and continuously in an atmosphere of trust, enabling collective inquiry about issues of importance to the members. A recurring theme in this study of the 2002 communities and in the report on the 2001 pilot program (Mitchell, 2002) is that some VET personnel are highly-skilled in facilitating group learning processes.

Enhancing practice

A community of practice can take charge of the development of its practice in a range of ways, including developing shared approaches and creating communal learning resources. The development of practice is enhanced by skilled VET facilitators who can help the community to build upon a base of common knowledge by tapping into both the formal and informal knowledge of the members, and by involving experts and seeking information from a range of sources. The development of practice involves a balance between exploring ideas together and producing documents and tools.

Benefits of effective structuring

Communities of practice enable practitioners to develop sophisticated skills and knowledge to function effectively in the challenging VET environment. Communities of practice also create value in multiple ways and deserve ongoing systemic and organisational support in VET.

The three-part structure of a community of practice needs to be understood and managed if the full benefits of communities are to be felt within VET.

Abbreviations

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

ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
NTF	National Training Framework
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Definitions of terms

The following definitions of terms regularly used in this document are provided at www.anta.gov.au, the website of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA).

The **National Training Framework (NTF)** is the system of vocational education and training that applies nationally. It is made up of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and nationally endorsed Training Packages.

The **Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)** is a set of nationally agreed arrangements to ensure the quality of vocational education and training services throughout Australia.

A **Training Package** is an integrated set of nationally endorsed standards, guidelines and qualifications for training, assessing and recognising people's skills, developed by industry to meet the training needs of an industry or group of industries. Training packages consist of core endorsed components of competency standards, assessment guidelines and qualifications, and optional non-endorsed components of support materials such as learning strategies, assessment resources and professional development materials.

A **Registered Training Organisation (RTO)** is an organisation registered by a State or Territory recognition authority to deliver training and/or conduct assessments and issue nationally recognised qualifications in accordance with the Australian Quality Training Framework. Registered Training Organisations include TAFE colleges and institutes, adult and community education providers, private providers, community organisations, schools, higher education institutions, commercial and enterprise training providers, industry bodies and other organisations meeting the registration requirements.

An **industry training advisory body (ITAB)**, also called industry training advisory board, is an organisation, usually an incorporated association or company, recognised as representing a particular industry and providing advice to government on the vocational education and training needs of its particular industry. There are both national and State and Territory industry training advisory bodies.

An **industry training council (ITC)** is a body established by an industry or business sector to address training issues.

For more information on the above concepts and for definitions of terms, see www.anta.gov.au

This chapter explains why it is important for VET practitioners to understand the structural elements of a community of practice.

Key points

Key points raised in the chapter include the following:

- As communities of practice are an important mechanism for facilitating collaboration in the implementation of a national training system, more knowledge is needed in VET about the structure of communities. The three fundamental structural elements of communities are a domain of knowledge, community and practice.
- Among the pilot communities funded in 2001, the most overlooked structural aspect was that of practice. Communities of practice funded in 2002 by Reframing the Future were encouraged to understand these structural elements and to focus particularly on the development of practice.

Definition of communities of practice

The definition of communities of practice, based on the literature and used to guide the Reframing the Future project teams, is as follows:

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; and have long-term benefits on organisational practice and productivity. (Mitchell, 2002, p.5)

Other issues related to communities of practice, such as their structure, cultivation, stages of development, challenges, critical success factors, benefits, limitations and potential, were summarised in a comprehensive evaluation of the 2001 pilot projects conducted by Reframing the Future. (Mitchell, 2002)

Evolution of Reframing the Future's sub-program

Reframing the Future designed the new sub-program on communities of practice in 2001, in response to findings from a strategic analysis of the VET sector (Mitchell & Young, 2001). The strategic analysis showed, among other findings, that the VET national training system – an industry-led, demand-driven, competency-based approach to training that was introduced in 1996 – required providers to become more client-focused by establishing improved relationships with both enterprise clients and individual students. The strategic analysis also found that the implementation of the national training system would be aided by activities that assisted the growth in relationships between the various stakeholders in the VET sector:

It is valuable for VET personnel involved in implementing the NTF to link with other personnel in the system, and this often means developing relationships that extend across industries and borders. The concept of communities of practice provides a framework for organising such widely distributed personnel. (Mitchell & Young, 2001, p.83)

The subsequent evaluation study of the sixteen pilot communities funded in 2001 (Mitchell, 2002) found conclusively that communities of practice formed between providers and between providers and clients can assist the development of these collaborative relationships.

As a result of the successes of the 2001 pilot projects, forty eight communities of practice were funded in 2002 involving over 2,323 participants from around Australia, drawn from both public and private sector training providers and from a broad range of industry areas. A sample of the communities is set out in the following table.

Table 1.1: A sample of the 2002 communities of practice

State/Territory	Description
NSW	a community of practice formed by TAFE NSW South Western Sydney Institute and bound by the common interest of establishing effective relationships to support the implementation of the Metal and Manufacturing Training Package
NT	a community of practice formed by Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory and focused on cultural expression, information and knowledge in remote Indigenous communities and the related Art and Museum Training Packages
VIC	a community of practice formed by Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE for child care professionals across the central Gippsland region in Victoria
TAS	a North and North Eastern Tasmania community of practice convened by the Institute of TAFE Tasmania that aimed to impact on the flexibility and responsiveness of VET
ACT	an ACT community of practice consisting of the Executive Officers of the nine Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITABs) which aimed to continue to improve the services that ITABs offer to industry
SA	a community of practice formed by the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) in South Australia, focused on the process of auditing and other matters involved with implementing the National Training Framework
QLD	a South West Queensland Regional Assessors and Trainers community of practice, formed by Business Success Group Pty Ltd, which assisted a range of public and private providers to address the requirements of the AQTF
WA	a community of practice formed in far north-east Western Australia by Eastern Pilbara TAFE and BHP Billiton that focused on improving the communication between the provider and the industry client
National	a community of practice formed by the Australian Red Cross Blood Service, designed to increase the knowledge of workplace trainers and assessors about the National Training Framework

The communities of practice listed above provide an insight into the range of different foci of the 2002 communities, the multitude of stakeholders and participants, the range of purposes and their targeted aims. Communities of practice suit the VET environment.

The three structural elements of communities of practice

Communities of practice are an attractive theoretical concept for collaborative-minded VET professionals, but they are not always easy to form, nurture and sustain. As with any group of human beings, communities of practice involve group dynamics, the group moves through stages of development and obstacles normally emerge. Communities of practice are deceptive: on the one hand they seem to be based simply on good relationships; on the other hand, communities of practice can be complex and easily derailed. (Wenger et al, 2002; Mitchell, 2002)

One of the issues identified in the evaluation of the 2001 communities (Mitchell, 2002) was the need for community members to be more aware of the structural dimensions of a community of practice: the dimensions that make a community of practice different from a work team or a project team. In January 2002 three prominent researchers in the field of community of practice, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), released *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, which sets out, more clearly than before in the literature, the internal structure of a community of practice. This internal structure distinguishes communities of practice from informal or temporary work groups or project teams.

Wenger et al (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. The following diagram highlights these structural elements.

Diagram 1.1: The three structural elements of a community of practice



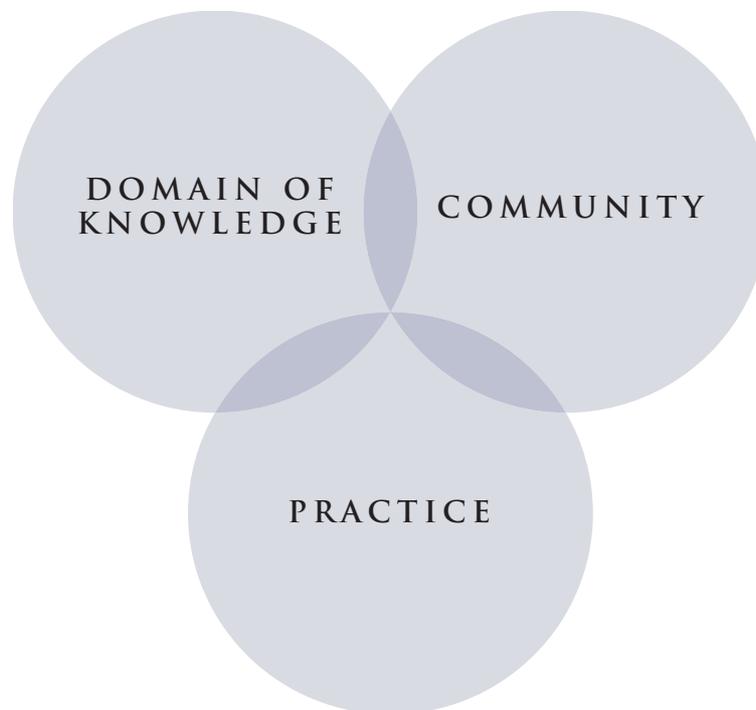
Wenger et al (2002) describe the three structural elements as follows:

- a *domain of knowledge* 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.
- 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.

- the *practice* is a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that community members 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, et al, 2002, pp.27-29)

Wenger et al (2002) stress that it is important to develop all three elements in parallel: ‘focusing too much on one while neglecting the others can be counterproductive’. (p.46). They acknowledge that developing ‘domain, community, and practice together is a balancing act: each element requires a distinct kind of developmental attention and work’. (p.46) They also find that the three elements interact, as suggested in the following diagram.

Diagram 1.2: Inter-connections of the three structural elements of communities of practice



When analysing these three elements in relation to Reframing the Future’s 2001 communities of practice, Mitchell (2002) made the following observations:

1. All the 2001 communities were clear about the broad domain for their projects: the implementation of the National Training Framework. 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. (p.24)

While the evaluation of the 2001 communities found that practice was the most overlooked element of the three structural elements of a community and that practice deserves special attention, future communities of practice in VET can also benefit from a fuller analysis of their domain of knowledge and their understanding of community.

In response to these findings, the project teams funded in 2002 to form communities of practice were directly encouraged to develop an understanding of the three structural elements of a community: the domain of knowledge, the community and practice. This encouragement was conveyed through the documentation for the sub-program, the national induction workshop and the questions that teams were asked to address in their reports.

Focus of this evaluation study

As a result of the above findings, this evaluation study focuses on the ways in which the 2002 communities of practice attended to the structural elements of their communities. In particular, the evaluation asks three questions:

- How did the 2002 communities define their domain of knowledge?
- How did the 2002 communities develop a community?
- How did the 2002 communities develop their practice?

The research methods used to find answers to these questions are set out in Appendix 1.

While the report deliberately focuses on models of good practice from the 2002 communities, the report also cites challenges faced by communities.

This chapter examines how communities of practice funded by Reframing the Future in 2002 defined their domain of knowledge.

Key points

Key points raised in the chapter include the following:

- The initial domain of knowledge of many VET communities of practice commonly involves issues related to Training Packages, such as assessment and delivery, or the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), or industry-provider relationships.
- Each community of practice will explore its domain of knowledge differently, affected by factors such as the Training Package involved and the profile of the industry and clients and providers.
- Domains of knowledge can change during the life of a community of practice – especially under the guidance of an experienced facilitator – often becoming more relevant and providing increased value to the members of the community.

What is a domain of knowledge?

Wenger et al (2002) define a domain of knowledge as follows:

The domain creates common ground and a sense of common identity. A well-defined domain legitimises the community by affirming its purpose and value to members and other stakeholders. 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. It also enables them to recognise the potential in tentative or half-baked ideas. (pp.27-28)

Members of a community share a commitment to a common domain of knowledge, which leads to the development of practice:

Without commitment to a domain, a community is just a group of friends. A shared domain creates a sense of accountability to a body of knowledge and therefore to the development of a practice. (p.30)

The shared domain influences the way the members value different ideas and share knowledge:

The domain guides the questions they ask and the way they organise their knowledge. It helps them sort out what to share and how to distinguish between a trivial idea and one with real promise. (p.30)

What were the domains of the 2002 VET communities?

The domains of knowledge for the 2002 VET communities were similar, at the surface level, as all the communities were required to focus on the implementation of the national training system. Legitimate foci for communities included Training Package implementation, the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), the recognition of current competencies, industry-provider relationships and collaboration with other providers. Common interests of the communities included:

- implementing newly-released Training Packages, including developing strategies for delivery and/or assessment;
- improving client-focus, in order to better customise delivery and assessment;
- enhancing relationships with other deliverers or assessors, in order to share knowledge and improve service provision.

Looking below the surface level, the domain of knowledge differed for each of the communities funded in 2002, depending on factors such as the interests of the members, the previous experiences and knowledge of the members and the specific needs they identified. For example, different communities focused on different aspects of Training Packages or different delivery or assessment strategies or different industries and clients or different networks of peers. Typical activities included:

- moving beyond a broad examination of the AQTF to the consideration of principles 7, 8 and 9;
- identifying issues surrounding assessment or delivery related to one particular Training Package and the unique profile of the expected cohort of learners;
- developing improved relationships with specific enterprises and industry representatives.

The following table shows the variety of foci of three different 2002 communities. The three communities share an interest in implementing Training Packages and meeting the requirements of the AQTF, but for different provider groups, different industries and different locations.

Table 2.1: Domain of knowledge of three of the 2002 communities of practice

<i>State/Territory</i>	<i>Descriptor</i>	<i>Challenges faced</i>	<i>Stakeholders involved</i>	<i>Domain of knowledge</i>
QLD	TAFE teachers in the mining industry in Queensland	TAFE teachers in mining rarely have the opportunity to meet together, due to the distances between staff Another problem for TAFE staff is finding forums for mixing with industry personnel	TAFE personnel Officers from the Mining Industry Training Advisory Board Industry representatives from 20 mining companies	Implementation, delivery and assessment of the Mining Training Packages in Queensland Changing from a modular based curriculum to Competency Standard Units (CSUs) Consistency in interpretation, delivery and assessment of CSUs across the State Responsiveness to the mining industry's needs and clients' requests Resources, delivery strategies and assessment procedures in mining training across the State The impact and applicability of AQTF principles 7, 8 and 9 for delivery teams and units
TAS	Providers and industry focused on issues associated with training veterinary nurses	Geographic distribution of the participants, around Tasmania Time constraints on providers who are small business owners	Private trainers and assessors Veterinary practice personnel	Veterinary industry training requirements Understanding of the Veterinary Nursing Training Package Addressing of AQTF requirements Industry involvement in Veterinary Nursing Training Package review process Understanding of workbased training

Table 2.1 (cont'd): Domain of knowledge of three of the 2002 communities of practice

State/ Territory	Descriptor	Challenges faced	Stakeholders involved	Domain of knowledge
VIC and national	Trainers and assessors from the process manufacturing and laboratory operations industries	To develop new skills in the implementation of process manufacturing Training Packages To collaborate across State/Territory borders	Industry, private and public providers, assessors, trainers, new apprenticeship centres, group training companies, State Training Authorities, schools, universities and adult and community education	Knowledge of the Process Manufacturing and Laboratory Operations Training Packages, quality requirements and support materials Implementation of the Process Manufacturing and Laboratory Operations Training Packages, PMB01, PML99, PMC99 and PMA98 Collaborative arrangements between all stakeholders in the provision of training in process manufacturing, across Australia Implementation of the Skills Assessment Program in NSW to facilitate the assessment of competencies of existing workers and the development of training plans

The domains of knowledge of the three communities of practice described in Table 2.1 share generic features such as the focus on Training Package implementation, but differ in many other ways.

Deeper, evolving domains of knowledge

The examples provided in Table 2.1 are of the broad domains of knowledge agreed to at the start of the respective communities' existence. Wenger et al (2002) find that domains of knowledge can change during the life of a community: 'the domain is not a fixed set of problems. It evolves along with the world and the community.' (p.31)

The following case study of a community of practice in Western Australia provides an example of how the community's domain of knowledge evolved during 2002, to become more relevant – and provided higher value – to the members of the community.

Figure 2.1: Case study of the domain of knowledge of a community of practice in the Western Australian rail industry

'emphasis on safety for the rail industry'	<p><i>The initial domain: assessing competencies for rail safety</i></p> <p>A community of practice was convened in 2002 by the Western Australian (WA) Transport and Storage Industry Training Council. The community was formed at a time when the rail industry in WA was experiencing a period of considerable change, impacting on the enterprise-based providers who need to provide appropriate training in the midst of that change.</p> <p>The facilitator, Debra Goostrey, from the Transport and Storage ITC, describes the initial climate for the community and the clear domain of knowledge, related to assessing competencies for rail safety:</p> <p>The rail transport industry is not only very traditional in nature, it is facing a period of significant expansion at a time when the workforce age profile means that significant numbers of employees will exit the industry over the next five years. The industry was historically dominated by Government provision and recent privatisation has led to the need for new working relationships to be developed by all parties. There is no public provision of training for this industry, which is dominated by enterprise Registered Training Providers. Because of the</p>
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Figure 2.1 (cont'd): Case study of the domain of knowledge of a community of practice in the Western Australian rail industry

	<p>enormous emphasis on safety for the rail industry, the rail regulator is extremely interested in the competency of the workforce and the consistency of standards of assessment in workforce development. (Goostrey, 2002)</p> <p>Assessing competencies for rail safety provided the initial and fundamental domain of knowledge for the community.</p>
<p><i>Deeper questions about validation</i></p>	<p><i>Exploring deeper layers of the domain</i></p> <p>The facilitator, Debra Goostrey, used a range of facilitation techniques to encourage collaboration and trust between the participants in this community of practice, including gaining up-front agreements from the different parties to their commitment to the process of working together.</p> <p>Having won the trust of the participants, she used probing questions to influence many of the discussions at each meeting of the community members. The questions took the participants to deeper levels of the topic they had agreed to discuss. For instance, in relation to the technical issue of the validation of assessment, the following searching questions were discussed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the evidence relate to the unit of competency? • Does the evidence reflect the four dimensions of competency? • Does the evidence address the key competencies? • Does the evidence cover the full range of performance identified in the unit of competency? • Does the evidence show competency over a period of time? • Does the evidence show competency in different contexts? • Does the evidence show that the candidate can apply the competency in current work? • Does the evidence take into consideration the literacy level required for the task? (Goostrey, 2002)
<p><i>'close to the edge of their comfort zones'</i></p>	<p><i>An evolving domain</i></p> <p>Debra Goostrey is an experienced facilitator and understood that, if participants were to obtain optimum value from their participation, then the exploration of the domain of knowledge for the community needed to move from a high-comfort level to a point where there is a – hopefully temporary – level of unease:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">The creation of real dialogue about cutting edge issues is fundamental to the success of the community. It is important that issues are not only important, but they are also cutting edge so that the community is seen as a leader, facilitating change and development rather than just a medium for discussion. It should be noted that the discussion of 'cutting edge issues' may move some people close to the edge of their comfort zones and the community needs to be strong enough to manage some potentially boisterous discussion. (Goostrey, 2002)</p> <p>The facilitator also distinguished between important issues and those issues that are both important and cutting edge:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Depending upon the nature of the community and the strength of the relationships within it, there may be a period of time required to move from discussion about important issues to those issues that are important and cutting edge. The first few meetings of the Rail community focused on establishing common ground looking at competencies which everybody was familiar with and assessed on a regular basis. The move is now into new territory as there is shared language and understanding and most importantly, sufficient trust in the group for discussion of more challenging issues. A point to note is just because an issue is cutting edge, it does not mean that it is automatically important to the group. (Goostrey, 2002)</p>

Figure 2.1 (cont'd): Case study of the domain of knowledge of a community of practice in the Western Australian rail industry

<p><i>'there are degrees of relevance'</i></p>	<p><i>Higher-level domain</i></p> <p>Debra Goostrey addressed the critical success factors for communities of practice, as set out by McDermott (2000), including 'Focus on knowledge important to both the business and community members'. She noted that, not only is this focus important, the more important the knowledge is, the more likely the community will succeed:</p> <p>Whilst this is a critical success factor that most communities would focus on, the key point to be made is that there are degrees of relevance and the more important the knowledge is, the more likely that the community will succeed. With the Rail Community, the project had met with success, however that success was amplified when the issues of 'Apply Safe Working in a Rail Environment' were put on the agenda. Meetings are attracting people from outside the direct community and the outcomes will be of real value to the participating organisations.</p>
<p><i>'dramatically greater awareness of assessment practices'</i></p>	<p><i>Elevating the domain leads to higher impact</i></p> <p>The original, limited aim of this project was to bring together assessors in three different RTOs to develop processes to ensure consistent outcomes were achieved. This included reviewing relevant policies and procedures for compliance with the AQTF and reviewing assessment instruments and providing resources such as question banks and observation checklists.</p> <p>Debra Goostrey reports that this original aim was met and surpassed:</p> <p>The overall aim has definitely been progressed with a dramatically greater awareness of assessment practices in the organisations that participated and a significantly higher level of confidence in consistency of the assessment outcomes across the sector. Because the trust issues were overcome very early in the project there was no need to develop intermediary resources such as the question banks and check lists, as assessment materials from participating RTOs were made available to the members of the community of practice. (Goostrey, 2002)</p> <p>The domain of knowledge of this community of practice deepened, as the community matured, under the guidance of an expert facilitator.</p>

The WA Rail Industry case study provides an example of a community of practice commencing with an important and specific domain of knowledge, but then delving deeper, enabling the members to gain more from their participation in the community. The domain took on higher and higher levels of meaning for the participants, demonstrating a point made by Wenger et al (2002) that the domain defines the value of its achievements:

It is what brings together and guides their learning. It defines the identity of the community, its place in the world, and the value of its achievements to members and to others. (p.31)

The facilitator, Debra Goostrey, modelled behaviour advocated by Wenger et al (2002, p.45) who find that addressing the following types of questions will help a community develop a shared understanding of its domain, find its legitimacy and engage the passion of its members:

What topics and issues do we really care about? How is this domain connected to the organisation's strategy? What is in it for us? What are the open questions and the leading edge of our domain? (p.45)

Conclusion

As VET staff and their clients have the shared interest in implementing a nationally consistent and high quality training system, the initial domain of knowledge in any VET community of practice can be straightforward. For instance, a valuable, initial domain of knowledge might be the issues surrounding one particular Training Package. However, more value will be derived from the community of practice as the domain is interrogated and members look at deeper levels of the issues. Experienced facilitators know how to guide members in this exploration.

This chapter examines how the individual communities of practice funded by Reframing the Future in 2002 developed a community.

Key points

Key points raised in the chapter include the following:

- Community-building is needed in VET to meet common challenges such as the distances between members of the same industry or the diversity of community membership. Community-building is not a luxury in VET: it is a necessity.
- Many facilitators in VET use a wide repertoire of community-building strategies to build relationships and to help members learn.
- Advanced community-building skills used by some VET facilitators include finding ways for members to communicate regularly and continuously in an atmosphere of trust, enabling collective inquiry about issues of importance to the members.

What is community?

Wenger et al (2002, p.34) believe that the community element is crucial to an effective knowledge structure. They define a community as follows:

It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. (p.34)

They also stress that ‘a community of practice is not just a website, a database, or a collection of best practices.’ (p.34)

Wenger et al (2002) place a strong emphasis on the contribution of community to effective learning:

The 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. Have you ever experienced this mixture of intimacy and openness to inquiry? Community is an important element because learning is a matter of belonging as well as an intellectual process, involving the heart as well as the head. (Wenger et al, 2002, pp.28-29)

A community is more than the sum of its parts. A community creates a social learning system:

Having others who share your overall view of the domain and yet bring their individual perspectives on any given problem creates a social learning system that goes beyond the sum of its parts. Members use each other as sounding boards, build on each other’s ideas, and provide a filtering mechanism to deal with knowledge overload. (Wenger et al, 2002, p.34)

The efforts of various VET communities in 2002 to create effective social learning system are described below.

How was a community developed within various 2002 communities of practice?

Communities of practice in Australian VET are often much harder to form than most of those discussed in the literature. (Mitchell, 2002, pp.15-16) Communities of practice usually consist of employees from the one company, such as a bank or an engineering or mining company, sometimes working in the same building, or distributed over a number of buildings and occasionally located in different parts of a country. In contrast, communities of practice in VET often involve members from multiple organisations, separated by vast distances. Additionally, the membership of communities of practice in VET can consist of multiple stakeholders, from teaching staff, to educational managers, to industry representatives, enterprise personnel and union officials.

Despite the challenges involved in setting up communities of practice in the multi-sided VET sector, the following discussion shows that a sense of community was developed within many of the 2002 VET communities. Table 1 below provides a summary of the features of a number of communities of practice from the Reframing the Future program in 2002 that effectively modelled the construction of relationships between many different stakeholders. The analysis also identifies the challenges to cross-organisational cooperation that communities of practice can overcome, including vast distances between parties.

Most pertinently, the following table summarises the community-building activities undertaken by the various communities, many of which activities extended the community's domain of knowledge and enriched their practice.

Table 3.1: Community-building activities of a sample of 2002 VET communities of practice

<i>State/Territory</i>	<i>Descriptor</i>	<i>Challenges faced</i>	<i>Stakeholders involved</i>	<i>Community-building activities*</i>
WA	State-wide community formed by Automotive Training Australia (WA) Inc	Vast distances in WA between trainers Communication barrier with industry	Industry training representative body Lecturers Local industry	Encouraged different levels of participation, depending on members' experience, interest, time constraints and local needs. Established six regional communities of practice (Bunbury, Albany, Port Hedland, Geraldton and Midland), attuned to local issues, rather than one major State one. Fostered relationships between training providers and industry clients. Disseminated solutions for maintaining the consistency of workplace assessment.
National	The Information Industries Training Advisory Board (IITAB) from SA convened a national community of practice for members of the printing industry	RTOs and ITABs located around Australia Mixture of personnel: some new to the industry, some long-standing members of the industry	Industry training advisory boards Industry representatives Training providers	Conducted a national forum of ITAB and RTO representatives. Provided opportunities for members to engage in consultations to develop a National Plan and to review the Print and Graphic Arts Training Package. Established a Technical Advisory Group to focus on compliance with national quality requirements.

Table 3.1 (cont'd): Community-building activities of a sample of 2002 VET communities of practice

State/ Territory	Descriptor	Challenges faced	Stakeholders involved	Community-building activities*
VIC	A community of practice was formed between Victoria University, RMIT University and the Victorian Indigenous Committee for Aged Care and Disability (VICACD)	Political and historical issues, regarding assisting Indigenous communities The 'courage to challenge each other' Business competition	University managers and teachers Industry personnel	Focused on a current real issue of concern to the community – the need to get workers qualified at all levels and the difficulty of working out a strategy that addressed the needs of the whole workforce while addressing regional concerns in a culturally appropriate manner. Set up a reflective environment in which people could raise issues and openly discuss them through meetings, a residential seminar, telephone calls and email. At the outset, decided as a group that the key to success would be the ability to develop positive respectful relationships, as this was the critical cultural tool required.
SA	Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE, in conjunction with a range of stakeholders related to training in laboratory operations, convened a community of practice.	Marginalisation: the two sub-groups were initially seen as marginal by their own organisations Members had difficulty finding enough time to meet together	Provider staff Enterprises' staff University staff Government department staff Industry training advisory boards	To overcome communication problems, the original community was divided into two: an Institute community and an enterprise-based community. Developed case studies of laboratory functions, job roles and skill and training needs, to support the implementation of the Laboratory Operations Training Package. Investigated common issues related to customising entry-level training and incorporating enterprise-based delivery and assessment options.
WA	Access and equity network of 30 lecturers from six campuses of Challenger TAFE in Perth	Face-to-face contact not always possible to arrange Overcoming any sense of 'disconnectedness' arising from the physical distances between members	Lecturers Staff development personnel	Set up five different communities of practice, with overlapping interests, covering Women's Program; Men's Program; Generic Access; Indigenous; Youth at Risk; and Disabled. Shared information and ideas about addressing assessment tools. Worked towards consistency in course documentation for AQTF purposes and consistency in assessment processes and judgments. Compared ideas about content and delivery methods.

* As recommended by Wenger et al (2002), the community-building activities of these communities of practice related to the community's domain of knowledge – normally knowledge around Training Packages and the AQTF – and the community members' practice, such as how to implement competency-based training and assessment.

The examples provided in Table 3.1 above demonstrate the challenges faced by VET personnel in convening communities of practice across organisations, industries and States/Territories. In response to such challenges, VET personnel use a wide repertoire of community-building strategies, from convening formal meetings, to forming sub-groups, to visiting stakeholders, to focusing the members on shared goals, disseminating information and inviting participants to contribute to priority issues.

Creating a community for a dispersed and diverse membership

The following case study from the drilling industry demonstrates that – with the help of a skilled facilitator who has a strong knowledge of her industry – when a community can ‘develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment’ (Wenger et al, 2002, p. 34), significant obstacles can be overcome.

Figure 3.1: Australian Drilling Industry Training Committee Ltd case study

<p>Dispersed group</p>	<p>Clear aim</p> <p>The Australian Drilling Industry Training Committee Ltd (ADITC Ltd) convened a community of practice in 2002 to allow personnel in the drilling industry who are involved in workplace assessment – particularly concerning recognition of prior learning and recognition of current competence – to network with others undertaking similar work.</p> <p>The clear aim of the community was to provide appropriate assessment and recognition services under the National Training Framework, leading to increased consistency and quality in assessment outcomes and practices.</p> <p>Set out below are the considerable challenges in creating a community among this dispersed group of participants.</p>
<p>Regularity and continuity of communication</p>	<p>Interacting regularly</p> <p>Convenor and facilitator Virginia Hilliard from the ITC found that face-to-face communication was not an option for the whole group. One sub-group from a single company, however, was able to gather some of its participants in one room before the telephone conferences. This allowed some discussion of issues and preparation of suggestions to table during the teleconferences, for example for input into the development of the <i>Drilling Industry Assessment Guidelines</i>.</p> <p>Only telephone conferencing and email communications were available to the whole group because of the geographic placement of participants and the highly mobile nature of their work. Several participants rang into each meeting from a different site venue each time, and personnel from the same company rang from different venues, and in one case, from different States. Telephone conferencing, while difficult with a large group, was successful and well-liked as a medium for the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> participants could at least have a sense of speaking to colleagues and participants (including the facilitator) are familiar with CB and other technology which has formal turn-taking strategies in place. (Hilliard, 2002) <p>While most Australians have come to accept email as an ubiquitous form of communication, Virginia Hilliard couldn't assume it was available for all members of the drilling community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Email allowed the fast movement of some documents, and participants networked using this medium independently. However, electronic communication has some natural limits caused by the isolation of many worksites and the need to maintain the communication medium, where it is available, for work or emergency purposes. This is due to the cost and difficulty of installing and maintaining the facility. In some regions, email and other electronic media are unreliable or unavailable. (Hilliard, 2002) <p>The facilitator put aside the limitations of only being able to communicate by telephone conferencing and, on occasion, email. In focusing more on the regularity of communication and targeting important topics, Virginia Hilliard understood a principle of community-building set out by Wenger et al (2002) about the importance of members interacting regularly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To build a community of practice, members must interact regularly on issues important to their domain... Moreover, those interactions must have continuity. ...Interacting regularly, members develop a shared understanding of their domain and an approach to their practice. (pp.34-35)

Figure 3.1 (cont'd): Australian Drilling Industry Training Committee Ltd case study

<p><i>Richer learning results from diverse membership</i></p>	<p><i>Common ground and diversity</i></p> <p>Virginia Hilliard describes her industry as ‘a scattered and dispersed community of business competitors, micro-businesses and businesses working over ten sectors of the industry’. Her community of practice mirrored this profile and consisted of three separate categories of members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firstly, the community consisted of three private RTOs: an industry organisation for the drilling industry, based in NSW; a drilling company based in WA; and a drilling company based in Queensland. • Secondly, the community involved self-employed individuals working as workplace assessors who carry out recognition services for drilling companies. • Thirdly, the community involved individual assessors working within drilling companies that are not RTOs. <p>Adding to the diversity of membership, some participants were direct business competitors, but Virginia Hilliard reported that this did not prove to be a problem in the course of this project:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">most participants valued being able to give direct input to something that they saw as impacting on their whole industry - there was considerable personal satisfaction in this. (Hilliard, 2002)</p> <p>Wenger et al (2002) suggest that a diverse membership makes for richer learning:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">The concept of community often connotes commonality, but it would be wrong to assume that the hallmark of an ideal community of practice is homogeneity... With enough common ground for ongoing mutual engagement, a good dose of diversity makes for richer learning, more interesting relationships, and increased creativity. (p.35)</p> <p>Virginia Hilliard built on the richness of the diverse backgrounds of the participants in her community. She also believes that the drilling community was ‘a particularly successful example of direct input from an involved and committed group who in normal circumstances would be unlikely to have a chance to participate’.</p>
<p><i>A safe place for exploration</i></p>	<p><i>A foundation for collective inquiry</i></p> <p>Convenor and facilitator Virginia Hilliard believes that her best facilitation strategy was ‘choosing things that people were interested in and willing to contribute to, that stretched them a bit and that they thought important’. She also believes that the community provided opportunities to make a significant and direct contribution at individual and company level to the development of national strategy:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Several participants said ‘I’m basically just a driller and it’s a bit beyond my level’. Initially they felt daunted, but quickly felt that the task was important and saw that the opportunity allowed national policy to be shaped by actual practice, with room for further development. This was universally seen as a good and sensible outcome. People were proud to participate in this aspect of the project, and more joined because of interest in this. (Hilliard, 2002)</p> <p>Another benefit of the community of practice was the sense of togetherness –</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">the feeling of being part of a community rather than in isolation, since most work as the only person in the company with any responsibility for training and assessment. (Hilliard, 2002)</p> <p>Virginia Hilliard effectively built a platform for dialogue and learning, where the members trusted and valued the process. Wenger et al (2002) find that learning requires an atmosphere of openness and that each community develops a unique atmosphere – intense or laid back, formal or informal, hierarchical or democratic:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Whatever norms members establish, the key is to build a foundation for collective inquiry. An effective community of practice offers a place of exploration where it is safe to speak the truth and ask hard questions. Trust is a key to this process. Meetings are intense, rich in content, engaging members in good discussions. (p.37)</p>

The drilling case study demonstrates the high-level community-building expertise of one VET facilitator, faced with an industry scattered across the country – a common challenge in VET.

Community-building in the hospitality industry

Two further exemplars of communities of practice are provided below, from the hospitality and police industries.

The first is of a community of practice in the NSW Hospitality industry. This tourism and hospitality community of practice was facilitated by Ryde College, TAFE NSW Northern Sydney Institute, and addressed the need to develop multiple relationships between training providers, industry and individual enterprises to respond effectively to working in a competitive training market. Attention was also given to gaining an understanding of the newly-revised training Tourism and Hospitality Training Package and to building strong relationships to ensure its effective implementation.

Methods used to bind the hospitality community together included inviting industry representatives to a series of structured events at the College, including lunches and dinners, at which reports were tabled of the community's consultations. In her planning, the College's facilitator, Irene Booth, needed to take into account the complexities of the Tourism and Hospitality industry, including the vast number of different occupational groups involved. She believes that the key to facilitating this ambitious Reframing the Future community of practice was 'to have confidence in the midst of chaos'.

Highlights from the hospitality community of practice – which underline the value of communities in binding together disparate groups – were summarised by the facilitator:

- The overall willingness of industry to participate in the scheduled meetings/activities on an ongoing basis – giving freely of their time and openly sharing experiences, insights and challenges facing the industry in such turbulent times and the impact of those challenges on training.
- The willingness of both industry and Tourism & Hospitality staff of Northern Sydney Institute (NSI), to be both open and honest in the dialogue sessions which enabled more issues/challenges to be discussed at a greater depth.
- The level of feedback that was collated from both industry and NSI staff noting the challenges facing industry and TAFE in the delivery of Training Packages. It provided some interesting, provocative and exciting topics for discussion in later sessions.
- The establishment of a number of teams for further workshoping and ongoing relationships focusing on aspects of training as identified by the community. (Booth, 2002)

As is evident from the above highlights, community building requires open, honest dialogue to meet the many issues and challenges facing VET-industry partnerships, and sometimes the discussions are provocative but necessary and exciting. Wenger et al (2002) find that effective communities are not necessarily without conflict:

In fact, the stronger a community, the better it is able to handle dissension and make it productive. In good communities strong bonds withstand disagreement, and members can even use conflict as a way to deepen their relationships and their learning. (p.37)

Community-building in police education, nationally

The second exemplar is a community of practice formed by police educators in Queensland and involving their peers in South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory, Victoria and Tasmania. The community focused on identifying effective course delivery of traineeships and cadetships and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work group classifications. The community aimed to establish a cross-border network of personnel who can share ideas and

develop a national and collaborative approach to the adoption of the Public Safety Training Package. Led by facilitator Ian Andrew, the community will be sustained over the next three years through a mixture of face-to-face meetings, email and bulletin board contact.

The community effectively bound together police educators from many different jurisdictions, building on the common goals of the police educators:

The change from an isolationist and exclusive approach to police training to a national and collaborative approach is already happening through the adoption of the Public Safety Training Package and the implementation of the NTF. Most state, territory and federal police services have either recently gone through or are currently going through a process of review and transforming a number of their programs to the National Training Framework format. (Andrew, 2002)

The benefits of the community-building for the participants in the community were substantial:

It enabled employees within different jurisdictions to link people with a common interest who did not have normal regular day-to-day contact.

It enabled the members to collaborate directly and use one another as sounding boards, and teach (and learn from) each other

It empowered individuals, opening up access to new knowledge and skills, and enabled them to manage change and fulfil the requirements placed on them by their employers

It fostered trust and allowed frank and supportive discussions to occur as they shared ideas and experiences.

In the course of helping each other and sharing ideas, and collectively solving problems, it allowed the individuals to become a trusted group of peers. (Andrew, 2002)

The community of police educators fits the description of a community of practice provided by Wenger et al (2002, p.34): a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and, in the process, develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment.

The above exemplars model the use of communities of practice to bind together disparate or dispersed members of the community, in the common pursuit of supporting the national training system.

Conclusion

There are a number of common issues and threads linking the communities described above:

- a broad range of stakeholders can be accommodated within a community of practice, from teaching and training staff to industry and enterprise representatives, professional associations and unions;
- the challenges overcome by communities of practice are many and varied, particularly in assisting multiple parties to collaborate;
- the achievements of communities of practice are pivotal to the implementation of a national training system, including enhancing relationships between providers and industry, assisting with the use of training packages and enabling improved consistency and quality of assessment.

The communities analysed above demonstrate the organisational and systemic benefits of communities of practice in the complex VET sector which stretches across Australia. These benefits stretch the boundaries of what was previously cited in the literature as the benefits of communities. Communities of practice suit VET and, ultimately, community-building is a necessity, not an option, in the complex VET environment.

This chapter examines how the 2002 communities of practice funded by Reframing the Future developed their practice.

Key points

Key points raised in the chapter include the following:

- A community of practice can take charge of the development of its practice in a range of ways, including developing shared approaches and creating communal learning resources.
- The development of practice is enhanced by skilled VET facilitators who can help the community to build upon a base line of common knowledge, by tapping into both the formal and informal knowledge of the members, involving experts and seeking information from a range of sources.
- The development of practice involves a balance between exploring ideas together and producing documents or tools.

What is practice?

Wenger et al (2002) provide a detailed definition of practice that focuses on the communal resources that form the basis of communication within a community:

It (practice) denotes a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance and accountability. These communal resources include a variety of knowledge types: cases and stories, theories, rules, frameworks, models, principles, tools, experts, articles, lessons learned, best practices and heuristics. They include both the tacit and explicit aspects of the community's knowledge. They range from concrete objects, such as a specialised tool or a manual, to less tangible displays of competence, such as an ability to interpret a slight change in the sound of a machine as indicating a specific problem. The practice includes the books, articles, knowledge bases, websites, and other repositories that members share. It also embodies a certain way of behaving, a perspective on problems and ideas, a thinking style, and even in many cases an ethical stance. In this sense, a practice is a sort of mini-culture that binds the community together. (pp.38-39)

This comprehensive definition and description provides a set of reference points for analysing the development of practice within VET communities of practice.

As Wenger et al (2002, p.46) indicate, a community can become proactive in taking charge of the development of its practice. The community can ask itself a range of questions such as:

What knowledge to share, develop, document? What kinds of learning activities to organise?
How should the knowledge repository be organised to reflect the practice of members and be easily accessible? When should processes be standardised and when are differences appropriate?

Wenger et al (2002) find that these questions help a community intentionally become an effective knowledge resource, both for its own members and for other constituencies that may benefit from its expertise. (p.46)

How did the 2002 communities develop practice?

As discussed in Chapter One, the evaluation of the sixteen pilot 2001 communities (Mitchell, 2002) found that the VET communities were clear about their domain of knowledge and were generally effective in community building, but were less effective in exploring the depths of professional practice. Mitchell (2002) recommended that 2002 VET communities of practice allocate sufficient resources to improve their understanding of the practice that underpins their community. The following discussion examines the efforts of a sample of the 2002 VET communities to develop their practice.

The three communities of practice examined below are:

- a community convened by the WA Arts Sport and Recreation Industry Training Council which considered issues surrounding the implementation of the Community Recreation Training Package;
- a community convened by CREATE Australia, which investigated the issues and practicalities of assessment in the arts, media and cultural industries;
- a community convened by TAFE NSW Northern Sydney Institute which examined challenges related to implementing the Business Services Training Package.

The first of these communities is discussed in some depth and the other two more briefly.

Development of practice in an arts, sports and recreation community

The following case study highlights a number of activities that contribute to the development of practice, including the use of a comparative model, tapping into both formal and informal knowledge, developing a tool and using experts and a knowledge repository.

Mal Gammon from the WA Arts Sports and Recreation Industry Training Council convened and facilitated a community of practice in 2002 to support the implementation of the Community Recreation Training Package. The community consisted of representatives from industry and from public and private registered training organisations (RTOs). The convenor found that one of the immediate benefits of the community is that it brought together a diverse range of stakeholders who shared a common aim of promoting community recreation. The challenge was to assist this range of stakeholders to develop a shared practice.

Figure 4.1: Case study of WA Arts Sports and Recreation Industry community of practice

<p>Sharing a comparable model</p>	<p>Using a comparative model</p> <p>The members of the Arts Sports and Recreation community of practice agreed that they had a model with which to compare themselves – the aquatic industry. The previous achievements of practitioners in the WA aquatic industry in addressing training issues were used as an inspiration to the participants in the 2002 community:</p> <p>The achievements of the aquatics side of community recreation have really set the standards for the potential benefits of accredited training for industry. In the case of aquatics, the peak association (LIWA Aquatics), a government body (the Health Department), registered training organisations and the ITC worked together to implement affordable training. This constituted an exemplary active core group on which to model the development of an active core group for the 'dry' side of community recreation. The facilitator had experience and knowledge of the aquatics project so was able to bring this experience to the community of practice. (Gammon, 2002)</p> <p>Wenger et al (2002) identify the consideration of a comparable model as a strategy likely to improve reflection of the community members on their current practice.</p>
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Figure 4.1 (cont'd): Case study of WA Arts Sports and Recreation Industry community of practice

<p>Methodologies for tapping knowledge</p>	<p><i>Tapping into formal and informal knowledge</i></p> <p>Several methodologies were used by the facilitator to create what was a requirement of the project – ‘forums for thinking as well as systems for sharing information’ – including the use of index cards in small group work:</p> <p>In some workshops members were encouraged to discuss issues as a whole group in a relatively unstructured way, whilst in other workshops members provided their input as a ‘round table’ exercise and in still other workshops members broke into smaller groups. In some workshops index cards were used to represent key ideas and the cards were then used as a way of recording information. The information from the cards were transcribed into notes and distributed to the group. (Gammon, 2002)</p> <p>Using the above methodology, informal and tacit knowledge of community members was made public and could be shared. Wenger et al (2002) cite such sharing of knowledge as fundamental to reflection on professional practice.</p> <p>To tap into members’ explicit knowledge, participants were asked to prepare for discussions of pre-set topics at the workshops.</p>
<p>Tool provides a focus</p>	<p><i>Development of a tool</i></p> <p>The facilitator’s methodology also included the development of a matrix, matching occupational titles to available training and then identified gaps:</p> <p>One workshop focused entirely on identifying gaps in the training market. Participants split into groups as follows: VET, University and industry. VET representatives recorded available training while industry noted down occupational titles. The whole group reconvened and matched occupational titles to available training and then identified gaps in the matrix. This matrix was useful in terms of clearly articulating gaps in the training market and in highlighting the fact that occupational titles differ across organisations. The matrix provided a tangible focus for the community. (Gammon, 2002)</p> <p>This matrix is a knowledge tool that can be used by the members of the community. Wenger et al (2002) find that the examination of practice is improved by the construction and application of such tools.</p>
<p>Key thought leader</p> <p>Establishing a baseline of common knowledge</p>	<p><i>Use of experts and a knowledge repository</i></p> <p>The use of experts – recommended by Wenger et al (2002) – influenced the knowledge developed by the community:</p> <p>As Human Resources Manager of one of the largest Community Recreation organisation in WA, Justine Smetham was identified as a ‘key thought leader’. Justine presented an overview of the way training was incorporated into that business and the importance and value of training. (Gammon, 2002)</p> <p>Wenger et al (2002) note that one of the tasks of a shared practice is ‘to establish a baseline of common knowledge that can be assumed on the part of each full member’ (p.38). In order to provide a shared base of knowledge in the group, an A4 folder was distributed at the first community meeting. This folder contained information pertaining to the vocational education and training system, skill recognition, a full copy of the Community Recreation Training Package qualifications framework and Training Packages in general.</p> <p>The folders were then used as a repository for the growing knowledge base within the group:</p> <p>Members were encouraged to add material distributed during the course of the workshops to their folders. This seemed to be an effective way of storing individuals’ resources and members usually brought these folders with them to workshops to refer to and add information to. The folder can easily become a transferable resource within and across organisations and can be tailored to suit individuals’ and organisations’ needs by the exclusion or addition of information. It can be used as an ‘induction tool’ for new members and a marketing tool for potential participants. (Gammon, 2002)</p>

Figure 4.1 (cont'd): Case study of WA Arts Sports and Recreation Industry community of practice

<p>Applying ideas to real scenarios</p>	<p>Identifying members' less tangible competencies</p> <p>The active, core group who participated in this community was committed to working toward a practical strategy to implement training into the community recreation sector and the facilitator ensured that this remained the case. Some of the following strategies were used to help create dialogue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taking a devil's advocate point of view; Using knowledge of training system and examples from other areas and suggesting practical strategies to 'try on'; Encouraging members to 'listen without prejudice' to ensure that all members' view points were heard and to promote creative thinking; Encouraging members to apply thoughts and ideas to real scenarios. (Gammon, 2002) <p>An email-based game called Depolariser was used to encourage the sharing of ideas.</p>
<p>Language translated into plain English</p>	<p>Attaining information from a range of sources</p> <p>Using steps cited by Wenger et al (2002) to promote reflection on practice, information was sourced from a range of websites, the Council's library and information systems and from other organisations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where language was over technical it was 'translated' into 'plain' English. An email with Internet links relating to communities of practice, industry training issues and other related articles was sent out to all participants. (Gammon, 2002)
<p>A basis for action, communication, problem solving</p>	<p>Placing shared resources at the heart of the community</p> <p>As Wenger et al (2002) noted earlier, the communal knowledge resources in a community of practice provide a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance and accountability. (p.38)</p> <p>Placing a variety of different types of shared resources at the heart of the Arts Sports and Recreation community – resources which can be built upon – enabled the members of the community to refine, enrich and extend their professional knowledge and practice.</p>

The description above of the development of practice within the WA Arts Sport and Recreation community of practice matches the pattern predicted by Wenger et al (2002):

An effective practice evolves with the community as a collective product. It is integrated in people's work. It organises knowledge in a way that is especially useful to practitioners because it reflects their perspective. Each community has a specific way of making its practice visible through the ways that it develops and shares knowledge. (p.39)

The WA community effectively developed its own way of organising, sharing and constructing knowledge that suited its different members.

Development of practice in a creative arts community

The following brief discussion describes elements of practice that were the focus of two other communities of practice that participated in the 2002 Reframing the Future program, illustrating ways of developing practice in other VET settings.

CREATE, the national industry training advisory board for the arts, media and cultural industries, in partnership with its State counterparts, key sector enterprises and RTOs, developed

a community of practice in 2002 to investigate the issues surrounding assessment in the arts, media and cultural industries. The community focused specifically on the issue of assessing creativity.

A national workshop was a key activity for the community, raising many valuable ideas, but the ongoing challenge is to maintain a community in which the members are located around Australia. Convenor and facilitator Marie Manidis considers that concrete results from the workshop and the community's other interactions in 2002 were the understanding that assessment involves working with industry, the acceptance that there is a mix of subjective and objective factors in assessment, and the commitment to making assessment criteria more explicit.

The CREATE community of practice stimulated reflection on practice in a variety of ways. For instance, at the national workshop, presentations or demonstrations were provided by a range of artists and practitioners from the areas of visual art, painting, film, multimedia, dance, music and acting. Participants at the workshop were then led through a process of recording their assessment of the arts practice and attempting to articulate the language used to describe creativity and competence in the cultural industries. Marie Manidis reports that the interest and dialogue this created was a highlight and featured highly in the participants' evaluation of the workshop.

Other strategies identified by community members, following the national workshop, that could improve their reflection on practice, included:

- exchanging of anecdotal comments about the experiences of becoming an RTO;
- ongoing discussion about common ideas and issues;
- development of an assessor network, operating both online and face-to-face;
- use of an email distribution list provided to all;
- development of a database which lists expertise so that people can make appropriate contacts as needed;
- an email discussion group, or on-line forum. Potential focus areas could be looking more closely at the creative process, having the innovation kit used in the arts;
- subgroup meetings on various topics of interest, working as 'mini' communities of practice;
- access to an online 'chat room';
- follow-up (e.g. quarterly) meetings to continue to discuss and debate creativity;
- development of assessment tools for clusters of units that involve the assessment of creativity (e.g. performance criteria, skills and knowledge). (Manidis, 2002)

The CREATE community of practice focused on a domain of knowledge that was very important to the community – assessing creativity – and the outcomes of their work in 2002 included not just an increased knowledge of this topic, but also an enhanced awareness of how the community can continue to develop practice.

Development of practice in a business services community

Understanding and implementing a Training Package is a common concern of VET professionals and is a likely focus of a community of practice. A community of practice convened by TAFE NSW Northern Sydney Institute established networks between part-time casual teachers, teachers and head teachers from other metropolitan Institutes, industry and Educational Divisions, to assist in the resolution of issues that arose with the implementation of the new Business Services Training Package, particularly issues related to assessment.

With the assistance of specialist facilitator Margaret Dix, sample activities undertaken by the community of practice to encourage reflection on practice included:

- the deliberate construction of professional conversations around assessment validation;
- recording of tips the participants would suggest for other teachers implementing evidence-based assessment in a Training Package environment;
- the extensive use of email to exchange ideas, keep track of proceedings and distribute the deliverables;
- developing a bank of 39 assessment tools that have been validated;
- creation of a validation process that is user-friendly and that all TAFE teachers can use. (from Dix, 2002)

The community also established agreements regarding delivery and assessment in relation to workplace delivery and examined the recognition process and the guidelines for supporting students.

As with the CREATE exemplar above, the Northern Sydney Institute community went beyond finding out about their initial domain of knowledge – in this case, the Business Services Training Package and related assessment matters – and enhanced their practice through a series of activities, including the development of communal resources.

Conclusion

The three communities of practice described above actively identified, reflected upon and improved their practice, such as their ideas, tools and work styles. This reflection on practice was particularly apparent in the following ways: the participants' examination of their assessment and delivery strategies, their focus on improving their collaboration with their peers and their desire to improve client satisfaction.

This chapter highlighted various activities that contributed to the development of practice within a sample of communities of practice funded by Reframing the Future in 2002. The discussion pointed to the tacit and explicit resources in each community and different ways that knowledge can be shared, such as by using experts or theories or tools. The study shows that future communities of practice in VET could usefully seek out and access the knowledge and competencies of community members and seek to develop communal knowledge resources.

Skills are needed to extract and build upon the knowledge and competencies of community members. Wenger et al (2002) suggest that one high-level skill is to know how to balance the development of documents and tools with the need for ongoing interaction. Wenger et al (2002) are clear that a community 'must have a shared understanding of what aspects of its domain are codifiable and which are not and what to do in each case':

Successful practice development depends on a balance between joint activities, in which members explore ideas together and the production of 'things' like documents or tools. It involves an ongoing interplay of codification and interactions, of the explicit and the tacit. (p.39)

The discussion above emphasizes the ongoing need for communities of VET practitioners to better understand their practice – including the knowledge, documents and tools the community develops. The discussion also highlights the key roles played by convenors, facilitators, content experts, guest speakers and experienced practitioners.

This chapter provides some final comments on the benefits of effectively structuring a community of practice.

Key points

Key points raised in the chapter include the following:

- Communities of practice enable practitioners to develop sophisticated skills and knowledge to function effectively in the challenging VET arena.
- Communities of practice create value in multiple ways and hence deserve ongoing systemic and organisational support in VET.
- Communities of practice have a three-part structure that needs to be understood and managed if the full benefits of communities are to be felt within VET.

Communities increase skills and knowledge

The profiles in this report on communities of practice provide insights into the vigorous response by some VET practitioners to the challenges of implementing a national training system; a system that consists of diverse stakeholders and clients with multiple goals in industries and locations around Australia.

VET practitioners need sophisticated skills and knowledge to function effectively in this complex environment. This report shows that one way for practitioners to continually develop and extend their skills and knowledge is for VET practitioners to collaborate within communities of practice.

Communities increase social capital

This report shows that communities of practice are being quickly embraced by VET providers as they provide a means to increase social capital: they are a means for practitioners to extend and cultivate their relationships with peers, industry and other stakeholders in VET. The profiles in this report demonstrate a new-found appreciation in VET that the social capital in an organisation is the product of practitioners' relationships. (Lessor, 2000) Communities of practice enable practitioners to create, share and apply their knowledge with other practitioners and with their clients.

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 many different ways. (Wenger et al, 2002, p.15). This creation of value deserves ongoing systemic and organisational support.

Communities need structuring and support

This report shows that communities of practice are not a soft option. They are not about idly chatting around the coffee machine or sending miscellaneous emails to each other. They are more than work groups or project teams. Communities of practice are distinguished from work groups or project teams by three underpinning structural elements – a domain of knowledge, community and practice – which can all be enriched through deliberate activities by members of the community. These deliberate activities can be influenced by knowledgeable convenors, highly-skilled facilitators and informed members.

As communities of practice are an essential aspect of knowledge management, Wenger, et al (2002, p.12) argue that organisations need to cultivate communities of practice actively and systematically, for the benefit of organisations 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 et al, 2002, p.13)

There are significant management implications of the findings from this research into the value of communities of practice for VET. 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 implementation of the national training system benefit from the improved professional relationships and shared understandings between the VET and industry personnel who participate in the communities.

Conclusion

Communities of practice have a complex three-part structure which needs to be understood and managed if the full benefits of communities are to be felt within VET. This report provides a range of exemplars of communities of practice that are structured appropriately and provide significant benefits for the sector.

Participative evaluation approach

The evaluation of the forty eight communities of practice operating in the VET sector in 2002 involved the use of participative evaluation. Participative evaluation is in contrast to the popular form of ‘management’ evaluation undertaken for Government-funded programs that is concerned with efficiency, effectiveness and accountability, and which focuses on the measurement of products or outcomes, in order to provide a report for decision-makers. In the case of this program, the participative evaluation aimed primarily to illuminate the processes and settings for the participants in the projects, in order to optimise the possible benefits for the organisations undertaking the projects. Using the participative evaluation methodology, feedback was provided to project teams throughout the year, to optimise the benefits derived by the communities.

Data collection

Data for the evaluation was obtained using the following qualitative research methods: from observations at a forum convened for the project coordinators at the start of the project and a national conference at the conclusion; from observations at workshops conducted for groups in each State and Territory at the mid-way point of each project; from reviewing the project teams’ action plans, mid-term progress reports and final reports; and from visiting a number of sites and interviewing participants.

Selection of exemplars

While all the exemplars cited in the report provide instances of good practice, many others could have been selected, according to the same criterion. As this was designed as a brief report, not all the good practices modelled by the 2002 communities could be recorded in the report.

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**EFFECTIVELY STRUCTURING
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN VET**

*Findings from an evaluation of 48 communities of practice
that were managed by Reframing the Future
and funded through the Australian National Training Authority in 2002*

JOHN MITCHELL

**Reframing
the
Future**

The logo for 'Reframing the Future' features the text 'Reframing the Future' in a bold, sans-serif font. 'Reframing' is in black, 'the' is in a smaller black font, and 'Future' is in red. A black swoosh underline is positioned beneath 'Future'. To the right of the text is a large, light purple sphere with a smaller, orange-red sphere partially overlapping its bottom edge.