

Communities of Practice

General

The term “*community of practice*” was coined in 1991 by [Etienne Wenger](#) and [Jean Lave](#) during their study of [cognitive apprenticeship](#) learning model.¹⁾ Communities of practice are

- “**groups of people** who share a **concern or a passion for something they do and learn** how to do it better as they interact regularly.”²⁾

A community of practice can for example be

- “a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope.”³⁾

Members of a community of practice don't need to be aware of its existence⁴⁾.

What are communities of practice?

A community of practice is defined by three elements:

- **Domain** - Members of the community of practice share interest for a certain domain.
- **Community** - Members of the community of practice take part in activities, discussions and learn from each other.
- **Practice** - Members of the community of practice practice the knowledge they share among themselves.

Size, formality and meeting frequency of a community of practice can vary. New members may join a community of practice and existing members can leave. Also, a community of practice cannot be created since this would mean forcing individuals to develop an interest for a specific domain and interact with each other to exchange and develop knowledge about the subject. Still, what can be done is to **facilitate emergence** of a community of practice and support it.

Some other important characteristics of a community of practice are⁵⁾:

- **Enterprise** - how active is the community in its quest for knowledge?
- **Mutuality** - how deep is the sense of community among its members?
- **Repertoire** - how self-aware is the community about its own levels and ways of practice?

Learning in a community of practice typically occurs through dialogue and discourse, sharing of ideas and knowledge, collaborative search for solutions to problems. [Social learning](#) through interaction with others is here expected to occur.⁶⁾ By interacting with experts new members of a community of practice increase their expertise and move from the periphery of a community towards its center. This process is called the *legitimate peripheral participation*⁷⁾.

What is the practical meaning of communities of practice?

The concept of communities of practice has practical applications in business, organizational design, government, civic life and education.⁸⁾

Transformation to communities of practice in schools could however be more demanding since education is their primary goal. The transformation can be observed in three dimensions: internally to organize learners into communities of practice around their school subjects, external to connect them with other communities outside school and over lifetime by organizing communities of practice lasting after the schooling period.

Criticisms

Communities of practice are, depending on the point of view on them, subjected to different criticisms. Some of them, identified by Roberts⁹⁾, are:

- **Power** - No matter if its source is a hierarchical position in an organization and thereby in a community of practice or length of participation in the community, members with greater power will have a greater influence in negotiating meaning possibly leaving new members on the periphery of the community.
- **Trust** - Members of a community of practice might be unwilling to share their knowledge without feeling of trust in other members.
- **Predispositions** - A community of practice may become inert in changing its views and practices.

Keywords and most important names

- **Communities of practice, community, social learning, legitimate peripheral participation**
- [Etienne Wenger](#), [Jean Lave](#)

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[Kirschner, Paul A., and Kwok-Wing Lai. Online communities of practice in education. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education* 16, no. 2: 127-131. July 2007.](#)

Read more

[Wenger, E. Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization* 7\(2\): 225-246. 2000.](#)

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