Communities of Practice

Much of the research and literature on communities of practice is focused on business and to a lesser extent on higher education, but some common thoughts on best practices relevant to our situation emerge, and this document attempts to collect and list some of those.

A working definition of a community of practice is probably a good starting point: The notion of a group whose members "share a passion for something they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better" (Wenger, 2006) seems to capture the most important elements of our situation. When it comes to the distinguishing features of CoPs in general, three elements have been identified as fundamental: a domain of knowledge, a community that cares about the domain, and a shared practice those people develop to be effective in the domain. A shared competence and a commitment to the domain distinguishes members of the community of practice from, for instance, interested observers. Members are practitioners, and their interaction with one another must be sustained and ongoing in order to be effective in developing a shared repertoire of resources and knowledge.

Best Practices for Communities of Practice

Below is a list of some discrete best practices culled from the literature. As you’ll see, some of them are somewhat contradictory or require that a balance be struck between competing values and priorities.

Organization / Roles

Focus on problems and solutions. Connecting a CoP to a specific inquiry is a good way to obtain focus.

CoPs need to strike a balance between over-regulation and under-structuring. While excess in either direction can inhibit a CoP it seems clear that some membership roles need to be defined from the outset, particularly for information collection and organizational tasks.

Face to face interactions are highly desirable. The conversational and social aspects of learning in a CoP are key, however even these need to be structured, which usually requires a facilitator.

Include community-building components. Lunches, breaks, meeting outside working hours in a relaxed setting are all good practices. Sharing responsibility for bringing snacks to a meeting is another community-building practice.

A CoP needs a way to keep abreast of current developments in the domain outside the community, and a way of bringing that knowledge into the CoP. A reader or gatekeeper who reads widely and shares this is one way to do this.

Management commitment to the program is essential. Members need to be afforded the time to attend CoPs, and there must be a sense that management values the project.

While the information specialist can easily fulfill the role of facilitator in cross-organisational CoPs, the leadership role is normally fulfilled by an expert in the field.

Casting too wide a net can quickly produce “information junkyards” as various individuals bring issues of limited interest to the table. Identify the important topics for members and focus only on those.
Because CoP are voluntary, their success hinges on whether members finding them interesting, stimulating and valuable. A CoP that hits the right spot will have a feeling of ‘aliveness’.

**Modes of learning**

Learning within CoPs is a social process where social participation builds shared resources – so learning can be viewed not as something that belongs to individuals but to the conversations that they are a part of.

Often people initially join communities and learn at the periphery. Over time they may become more engaged and migrate from the periphery to the centre. Allow for and encourage peripheral engagement and migration of involvement.

Storytelling, role-play scenarios, and knowledge mapping are some good methods for capturing knowledge in a CoP. Experience conveyed through stories often resonates with other practitioners.

Knowledge sharing, whether face to face or via technology, should be set up to allow members to pull rather than push information. Knowledge should emerge organically, out of social interactions.

Take care that the CoP does not become a firehose of information spraying a deluge of unrequested information at members.

**Documenting**

Because so many of the most useful developments in a CoP occur in the course of ephemeral social interactions it’s a good idea to develop a toolbox of shared memory for things like routines, vocabulary, problems and solutions (or lack of solution), commitments and symbols -- things whose meaning can become opaque over time as their original context dissipates -- as well as for the sorts of things that are traditionally archived like documents and decisions. However, there are reasons to be wary of excessive documenting. The problems relate to the (in)ability of a document to capture a rich social process of learning and the effects the actual process of documenting can have on attitudes. It’s hard to document insights since those depend so heavily on context and context is difficult to memorialize in a document. As a result documenting can create a shallow record of a very rich experience and fail to convey the true knowledge that was developed. Document only when it’s clear that doing so will provide value to the community, and where it’s possible to convey the context. Document relatively stable information that doesn’t require much in the way of interpretation and contextual cues. Excessive documenting quickly becomes an imposition, raising the danger that it will be seen as something that gets in the way of “real work”. Try to integrate knowledge sharing into everyday work processes.

**Technologies**

Interpersonal conversation is the primary method of communication in most CoPs. However, different forms of information travel best through different media. For instance a platform suitable for individual discussions may not serve best for group discussions. Forcing all communication through a single medium can clog it, so try to share knowledge through multiple forms of communication. If a single form of communication is dominant it’s wise to keep other communication methods available.

**Measuring value**
Plan from the outset on measuring the value of the CoP. Because it’s hard to capture/measure the value of CoP nontraditional methods are often helpful: members stories can be very useful here, these need to be collected and recorded.

**Changing roles**

CoP go through stages of development, and over time roles within a CoP will need to change as well. Initially there’s a focus on group identity. Once the group forms it needs to focus on the ‘hows’ of tasks like capturing memory, creating structure and context. At this stage roles need to be filled in order to set up relationships, work on building a group identity and address needs like workspace and communication. As the group gains momentum and works out its own ways of sharing knowledge attention may shift to constructing new methods for group interaction, access and knowledge building. Again, this requires planning and facilitating roles be filled. Organizational issues will arise that require decision making over new directions and linkages for the group. Over time, the CoP will need to adapt to changes in environment and the group’s leaders need to be open to changes in their own roles or functions, which may shift towards mentorship. Finally, the group may enter what’s been called the disengage and disperse stage: where the usefulness of the community has faded, members will disengage and move on. The focus of the organizers at this point shifts to maintaining connections, convening reunions, and bringing about decisions on preservation of knowledge questions.