

# Communities of Practices:

## informal e-learning as professional development for educators

### Background

Since Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice, educators and educational researchers have looked at ways to leverage technologies to support collaboration and enhance professional development efforts. This white paper will outline recent publications on the subject, synthesize findings, and present implications for further investigation.

Communities of practice can be defined as groups that share a common interest or focus that is defined by the interactions of the participants. Although common interests can be facilitated by certain members of the group, it is through interaction or “negotiation” (Wenger, 1998) that community is built and learning takes place. The need for engaging and effective forms of professional development within education has never been greater due to the ever increasing demands placed on educators to adapt to the needs of today’s students. With the use of technology, educators are afforded the possibility to connect across space and time in ways not possible a decade ago. With these technologies in hand, educational researchers are evaluating the effectiveness of different approaches to building and sustaining online communities of practice for the purpose of improving teaching practices.

### Review of Four Recent Publications

#### **Teachers’ Roles and Professional Learning in Communities of Practice Supported by Technology in Schools**

Hartnell-Young’s paper (2006) is a research study investigating the role of Communities of Practice within the school system in Victoria, Australia. Four topics were studied by focusing on the use of internet portals by teachers: designing learning environments, managing people and resources, mediating student learning, and improving practice. By analyzing the reflections and interactions of teachers, Hartnell-Young made the following conclusions: First, teacher reflection and openness to communicate with peers lead to a positive social environment. Second, teachers require support from the administration and statewide technology infrastructure to initiate collaborations. Finally, Hartnell-Young suggests that teachers operating in a community of practice can share responsibility for designing learning environments, managing people and resources, and mediating student learning.

### **Collaboration is Key: How a Community of Practice Promotes Technology Integration**

This article is a case study that describes how a professional development program called Star Tech used communities of practice to encourage the integration of technology into the curriculum to improve instruction for students with disabilities. Zorfass and Rivero found that through a community of practice model, teachers were more inclined to share their strengths with others. Also, teachers were found to solicit support of fellow teachers to “translate ideas into practice.” (Zorfass & Rivero, 2005)

### **Online Community and Professional Learning in Education: Research-Based Keys to Sustainability**

In his article, Havelock (2004) explores research in online learning communities and reviews efforts to foster online communities of practice for teachers. Based on his investigation, Havelock makes several key points. First, he believes that to effectively research online learning communities, the researcher must be an object participant in the community. He states that for communities of practice to mature and develop, it takes a dedication of time and resources. Finally, he calls for more research to be done to understand the relationship between professional development within a community of practice and students’ educational outcomes.

### **Teacher Professional Development, Technology, and Communities of Practice: Are We Putting the Cart before the Horse?**

Schlager and Fusco, in their 2004 chapter, write about the Tapped In® project and discuss its effectiveness and the implications for future efforts to develop virtual communities of practice for educators. Eight characteristics called Guideposts are described as critical features required to promote professional development within a community of educators:

- **Learning Processes** - The social structures and flexibility necessary to promote community building are not available in relatively restrictive learning management systems.
- **History and Culture** - Designers must identify and match technologies to the needs of participants for sharing community knowledge and resources.
- **Membership Identity and Multiplicity** - Technology needs to be able to accommodate flexible roles of participants within and across interest groups without limiting peripheral participation.
- **Community Reproduction and Evolution** - Creating networked models that encourage access by novices to the experts in an educational community can be an efficient way to spread resources in school districts where turnover is high.
- **Social Networks** - Measuring and tracking the social structures within a community can provide the necessary data to recognize successful group characteristics and intervene when unsuccessful groupings emerge.
- **Leaders and Contributors** - Technology needs to accommodate and encourage leadership from all members within the community.

- **Tools, Artifacts, and Places** - Caution and planning are important when introducing new tools and technologies to the community so that members can integrate them without disrupting the existing culture.
- **The Practice** - A comprehensive approach to design community for the practice of educating children that incorporates all stakeholders instead of separating teaching, administration, and professional development.

## Implications and Future Directions

The research being done to investigate and evaluate effective uses of online professional development through communities of practice is only just emerging. There is certainly evidence to support that there are benefits for teachers to collaborating, sharing ideas, and developing their practice within a community of practice. How to effectively accomplish community in an online environment that promotes professional development is still unanswered. Schlager and Fusco (2004) present the most compelling arguments for how and why these efforts can work. Their eight guideposts were well stated, supported by research, and intuitively make sense. As someone who wants to believe in the value of communities of practice for professional development, I'll be interested to see future evaluation efforts.

## Resources

### Publications

Hartnell-Young, E. (2006). Teachers' roles and professional learning in communities of practice supported by technology in schools. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 14(3), 461-480.

Havelock, B. (2004). Online Community and Professional Learning in Education: Research-Based Keys to Sustainability. *Association for the Advancement of Computing In Education*, 12(1), 56-84.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Schlager, M. S. & Fusco, J. (2004). Teacher professional development, technology, and communities of practice: Are we putting the cart before the horse? In S. Barab, R. Kling, and J. Gray (Eds.), *Designing Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Zorfass, J., & Rivero, H. K. (2005). Collaboration is key: How a community of practice promotes technology integration. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, 20(3), 51-60.

Wenger, E. (1998) Communities of Practice. Learning as a social system, *Systems Thinker*, <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>.

### Websites

Etienne Wenger's Home Page - <http://www.ewenger.com/>

Community Intelligence Labs - <http://www.co-i-l.com>

Distance Consulting, Community of Practice Resources - <http://home.att.net/~discon/KM/CoPs.htm>

Wikipedia on Community of Practice - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community\\_of\\_practice#Communities\\_of\\_Practice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice#Communities_of_Practice)