



National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement

How to... ...build communities of practice

Introduction

Community university partnerships often involve people and organisations with different cultures, knowledge bases, power relationships and identities that can make effective co-working difficult. Understanding the concept of communities of practice (COP) can help community members and university partners align goals, address power issues upfront and develop mutually beneficial outputs. COPs 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.

Etienne Wenger, one of the people who coined the term says:

"I have worked closely with Cupp at the University of Brighton in applying the communities of practice concepts to university-community partnerships and consider the two well-matched. The thinking around communities of practice seems to have helped handle some of the complexities involved in universities and communities co-working."

Getting started

"A community of practice (COP) is a group of people who share an interest. The group may evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular topic, or it can be created specifically with the aim of developing knowledge around a common concern. It is via the process of sharing information and experiences within the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop their own knowledge and skills."

Lave & Wenger, 1991

- Identify the 'practice' or topic. Is it, for example, 'those interested in providing advice services in Brighton' or 'those interested in working with young people facing adverse circumstances' or 'those interested in improving the health of older people in Eastbourne'?
- Identify an initial goal and a time period for review
- Decide who is going to be involved initially and what will be the expectations of members. Prioritise those who meet the skill set and balance this with involvement of all key stakeholder groups
- Decide who is going to convene the COP
- Work out how you are going to meet – real, virtual or both, and what resources are needed
- Be prepared to go through the classic development phases of forming, storming, norming and performing. You will need to identify mechanisms for translation between different work cultures e.g. service user, academic, practitioner, policy maker. Small scale concrete projects can be very helpful in enabling people from different work cultures to understand each other. There are also many useful techniques for group development that might be helpful (see Bourner and Chambers)
- Decide how you are going to promote the value of the group, and to whom. Can you capture the value that the community of practice adds (e.g. a website outlining projects that have arisen as a result of the group, or a regular email to key decision makers)

- Set up processes that enable you to welcome new members to the COP
- Set in place periodic reviews. Is the COP still needed? Is it needed in the same form?

What it can be used for

- Clustering projects together under a shared theme to promote longevity and impact
- Helping different stakeholders keep up to date with information and skill development that is relevant to them
- As a mechanism for assessing the viability and value of new pieces of work or projects
- Influencing key decision makers by providing them with well worked and mutually owned solutions to shared problems
- Explicitly working with power differentials and different knowledge bases

Things to bear in mind

- Some people think it's just a fancy name for a network so don't get too hung up on definitions
- Although it might sound like a 'soft' goal, often an appropriate initial aim is to develop a shared understanding amongst the COP. This is of high value and should provide a sound platform for effective co-working and deeper learning
- Think who should be involved in the COP to give the best chance of real practical progress
- Consider "who has the skill legitimacy and leadership to convene these communities" (E.Wenger from IDEA Communities of Practice booklet, foreword)
- Acknowledge that all stakeholders have knowledge that is useful and find ways of making this visible
- Create opportunities for the group to see examples of good practice in operation
- Although there may well be an initial scope for the COP ongoing leadership should not be classically 'top down'. The point is that all stakeholders should be encouraged to offer leadership in different aspects of the COP's work
- Emphasise both the value of different perspectives alongside the strength of mutual action
- Try to produce some things together (e.g. a pamphlet, event or web entry) as this helps really get to grips with co-working – in the COP jargon these are called 'boundary objects'
- Teams or groups of people are thought to go through classic growth stages. The first four stages of team growth were first developed by Bruce Wayne Tuckman and published in 1965 (see resources). His theory, called "Tuckman's Stages" is that these stages are inevitable in order for a team to grow to the point where they are functioning effectively together and delivering high quality results. In 1977, Tuckman, jointly with Mary Ann Jensen, added a fifth stage to the 4 stages: "Adjourning." The adjourning stage is when the team is completing the current project. This theory is useful to think about alongside the idea of developing communities of practice

Cost and time requirements

Example costs

There are very many different ways of establishing COPs so example costing is tricky. A small scale effort of 20 people from one city or small geographical area, who wish to physically meet together, might look something like:

- 4 meetings a year. Room hire and refreshments £1000 (consider asking a sponsoring organisation e.g. the university to give rooms for free)
- Web presence £1500 in year 1 (again see if a sponsoring organisation might provide this as in kind support)
- The biggest cost is likely to be people time but as far as possible this cost should be covered by the organisation that members come from. However, commonly there will be members who do not come from organisations or whose organisations are not sufficiently funded to support their time. Funds do need to be set aside to support the costs of service users, members of the public and students. Assume £500 a year to be able to make a contribution towards these costs.
- A conference event might be appropriate at the end of a year or so to help draw in a bigger group of stakeholders. Depending on various circumstances it might even be possible to cover costs by charging participants. A conference for 70 people could probably be run for £1500 covering room hire and modest refreshments.

Example timings

[Same assumptions as above]

Month 1: Determine scope of COP. Describe the practice or topic and select convenor

Month 2-3: Convene COP and hold first meeting. Set up goals and review period. Plan for web site or other method for capturing learning

Month 4-5: Conduct 'COP building activities' and start to share learning

Month 6: Hold meeting 2. Plan practical projects and continue to share, and capture, learning

Month 7-8: Conduct practical projects, capture and share learning

Month 9: Hold meeting 3 Share learning from practical projects. Plan dissemination of learning to broader audience and/or key decision makers

Month 10-11: Intensive process of capturing learning

Month 12: Hold dissemination event

Month 13: Review COP. Have we met our goals? Have we created unexpected benefits? Should the COP continue or has it run its useful course?

External resources

- Hart, A., and D.Wolff. 2006 'Developing communities of practice through community-university partnerships' *Planning, Practice and Research* 21(1) 121-138

- [New Eyes: Meeting Challenges Through Communities of Practice. IDEA Partnership pamphlet, July 2007](#)
- [Hart, A., Maddison, E. and Wolff, D. \(eds.\) Community-University Partnerships in Practice, Leicester, NIACE. 2007](#)
- [Communities of Practice: A new approach to solving complex education problems](#)
- [Bourner T. et al, Workshops that Work](#)
- [Chamber R. Participatory Workshops: A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas and Activities](#)
- [Bruce Trucker, Mary Ann Jensen: the 5 stages of team growth](#)
- [Lave, Jean; Wenger, Etienne \(1991\). Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.](#)
Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press. [ISBN 0521423740](#). <http://books.google.com/?id=CAVIOrW3vYAC>; first published in
1990 as Institute for Research on Learning report 90-0013



National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement



University of
BRISTOL

