

# Knowledge Communities, Communities of Practice, and Knowledge Networks

**Tobias Müller-Prothmann**

*Free University Berlin, Germany*

## INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, the social perspective has emerged as the dominant paradigm in information and knowledge management studies. First-generation knowledge management, characterised by a technical and technological process view, has given way to new approaches that examine social dimensions of knowledge creation, transfer, and management. This shift of focus takes into account the perspective that the majority of individual knowledge transfer does not follow formal hierarchies or processes, but is instead driven by personal and informal communications. Such a social constructionist view of knowledge exchange considers not only single individuals, but also social aggregates and their structural patterns. Even so, despite a growing literature on the socially derived related concepts of knowledge communities (see, e.g., Botkin, 1999; Erickson & Kellog, 1999; 2001; Lesser, Slusher & Fontaine, 2000; Schmidt, 2000), communities of practice (see, e.g., Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lesser, 2001; Wenger, 1999), and knowledge networks (see, e.g., Collinson & Gregson, 2003; Liyanage, Greenfield & Don, 1999; Nohria & Eccles, 1992; Powell, 1998; Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999), there is confusion over their conceptual and applied distinctiveness. Could it be, for example, that they are just different labels for the same phenomenon? Or are there justifiable and valid differences that demand a more careful and reflective use of terminology? This article provides basic steps to the exploration of similarities and differences between the concepts of knowledge communities, communities of practice, and knowledge networks.

## BACKGROUND

Despite the existence of concise theoretical constructs that enable us to identify the unique concepts

of communities of practice, knowledge communities, and knowledge networks, there remains a great deal of definitional misinterpretation and misapplication in both the literature and in practice. Below the three concepts are introduced before examining some of the most common misconceptions and practical inconsistencies.

Knowledge communities, also called communities of knowing (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995), are “groups of people with a common passion to create, share, and use new knowledge for tangible business purposes” (Botkin, 1999, p. 30). After Botkin, they are characterised through shared values and a common commitment that create a sense of belonging, trust, and openness amongst their members. Thus, knowledge communities provide a context for the sharing of knowledge. Moreover, “they are based primarily on the sharing of knowledge rather than practice” (Scarbrough & Swan, 2001, p. 13). Indeed, while Scarbrough and Swan’s analysis of knowledge communities in innovation management distinguishes between IT-based and community-based approaches, most authors focus on knowledge communities as communities based on or at least supported by IT systems, often known as virtual knowledge communities (see, e.g., Diemers 2001; Erickson & Kellog, 1999, 2001; Schmidt, 2000).

Communities of practice are commonly constituted through shared work practice over a period of time (see Brown & Gray, 1998). Often, they are compared to an apprenticeship model where soft knowledge is transferred through the situated learning that takes place in apprenticeship environments. But the central communities of practice concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” is not restricted to apprenticeships alone. Rather, communities of practice “imply participation in an activity about which all participants have a common understanding... The community and the degree of participation in it are in some senses inseparable

from the practice” (Hildreth, Kimble & Wright, 2000, p. 29). From this perspective, communities of practice are a social context for “learning as legitimate peripheral participation” (Hildreth et al., 2000, p. 28).

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), communities of practice may be oriented towards hierarchy or collegiality. Hierarchical communities of practice allow for socialisation of novices through expert masters into local understandings of the meaning of the work through opportunities for “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In collegially based communities of practice, “informed dialogue among members is central to the on-going co-evolution of meaning and capabilities” (Liedtka, 1999, p. 7).

One of the defining characteristics of a community is its bounded nature: it has a boundary in terms of social interaction and membership. This applies for a knowledge community as well as for a community of practice. Networks, including of course knowledge networks, are not characterised through clearly defined boundaries. Rather, the analysis of networks aims at tracing social relationships wherever they may go (on the boundary specification problem in network analysis, see Laumann, Marsden & Prensky, 1989). Discussions of network structures in management literature were influenced for example by Drucker (1989) and Savage (1990). Networks can be seen as a third form of organisation (Powell, 1990) or as a hybrid form of organisation between market and hierarchy (Thorelli, 1986). All these discussions state the increasing importance of networks.

Networks can be distinguished according to their level as between individuals, groups, communities, organisational units, organisations, collectives of organisations, or even between societies. Network research in knowledge management tends to stress the importance of informal networks have a long history of study. Informal social relations in organisations have been subject to research since at least the 1930s with the classical Hawthorne studies (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1947).

Often too, networks are viewed in the context of knowledge management as an activity, that of “networking.” Seufert et al. (1999) “use the term ‘knowledge networking’ to signify a number of people, resources, and relationships among them, who are

assembled in order to accumulate and use knowledge primarily by means of knowledge creation and transfer processes, for the purpose of creating value.” They also distinguish between emergent and intentional knowledge networks. “Intentional knowledge networks are seen as networks that are built up from scratch, whereas emergent knowledge networks already exist but have to be cultivated in order to become high performing” (p. 184).

Although the unique dimensions of the three distinctive concepts of knowledge communities, communities of practice, and knowledge networks can be clearly discerned, such distinctions are rarely found in the literature. Following Botkin (1999), the difference between communities of practice and knowledge communities is that communities of practice “are informal groups, shaped by circumstances, visible mainly to social anthropologists,” whereas knowledge communities “are purposely formed...and their purpose is to shape future circumstances. They are highly visible to every business person in the organization” (p. 31).

Scarbrough and Swan (2001) try to distinguish knowledge communities from communities of practice in that they are based primarily on the sharing of knowledge rather than practice; however, they are able “to interface” with existing communities of practice (Scarbrough & Swan, p. 13). Moreover, bringing into play a network perspective, Swan, Newell, Scarbrough, and Hislop (1999) develop a “networking community” perspective on knowledge management: “Networking as a social communication process, which encourages the sharing of knowledge among communities” (p. 263).

## **AN EXPERT VIEW**

From August 2003 until January 2004, the author undertook explorative study<sup>1</sup> of the views and interpretations that expert knowledge management academics and practitioners have of the three distinct concepts of knowledge communities, communities of practice, and knowledge networks. In the study, the experts were asked to define the three concepts and to outline the differences between each other.

The criteria used to distinguish the three concepts were initially derived from a study of the literature on communities and social networks. They

6 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/knowledge-communities-communities-practice-knowledge/10500](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/knowledge-communities-communities-practice-knowledge/10500)

## Related Content

---

### Developing Virtual Communities in Transition Economies

Panagiotis Damaskopoulos and Rimantas Gatautis (2006). *Encyclopedia of Virtual Communities and Technologies* (pp. 125-130).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/developing-virtual-communities-transition-economies/18057](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/developing-virtual-communities-transition-economies/18057)

### Using a Design Science Research Approach in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) Project: Experiences, Lessons and Future Directions

Muhammad Nazrul Islam (2017). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 42-59).

[www.irma-international.org/article/using-a-design-science-research-approach-in-human-computer-interaction-hci-project/188480](http://www.irma-international.org/article/using-a-design-science-research-approach-in-human-computer-interaction-hci-project/188480)

### Digital Disruption: Virtual Influencers Transforming Traditional Marketing

Ethelbert Garcia Galang and Marie Grace Avelino Gomez (2025). *Redefining the Future of Digital Marketing With Virtual Influencers* (pp. 25-54).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/digital-disruption/378976](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/digital-disruption/378976)

### Bunker-Room Mnemonics for Second-Language Vocabulary Recall

Alexia Larchen Costuchen, Larkin Cunningham and Juan Carlos Tordera Yllescas (2022). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 1-13).

[www.irma-international.org/article/bunker-room-mnemonics-for-second-language-vocabulary-recall/304899](http://www.irma-international.org/article/bunker-room-mnemonics-for-second-language-vocabulary-recall/304899)

### Mathematical Retrieval Techniques for Online Mathematics Learning

Le Van Tien, Quan Thanh Tho and Hui Siu Cheung (2011). *Handbook of Research on Methods and Techniques for Studying Virtual Communities: Paradigms and Phenomena* (pp. 394-409).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/mathematical-retrieval-techniques-online-mathematics/50354](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/mathematical-retrieval-techniques-online-mathematics/50354)