

Chapter 39

How to Utilize an Online Community of Practice (CoP) to Enhance Innovation in Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Involving the community in supporting students' learning is something most educators would consider high in importance. Communities of practice have proven they assist authentic learning to take place. Developing an online community of practice adds a layer of complexity to classroom learning, as it is more than simply converting activities to Web-based interactions. This chapter provides background to what communities of practice are and how they function. It outlines the considerations needed to design a successful and sustainable community of practice. Utilization, considerations for implementation and future trends will also be elaborated upon.

INTRODUCTION

The New Zealand Education Curriculum has a focus and vision that New Zealand children will grasp the opportunities given by new knowledge and technologies to provide an overall positive

future for the country. By providing an online network of individuals who engage, collaborate and share an area of knowledge/interest (a Community of Practice) children are better able to meet this vision. An online Community of Practice (CoP) can share knowledge, resources, expertise, experiences, tools and methodologies. This collaboration improves the learning of both

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the individual and the group as a whole. An online CoP gives learners opportunities to engage, collaborate and share knowledge on a local, national and international platform while minimizing time and space matters.

This chapter will provide background to what communities of practice are and how they function in the New Zealand context and curriculum.

If online communities of practice (CoPs) are to be sustainable and have an effect on teaching pedagogy, they need to be designed to improve existing teaching practice. The design focus of a successful online CoP needs to consider technical, pedagogical and organizational issues. How to establish and develop an effective online CoP from a bare platform will be explained as well as identifying important aspects, which need to be included.

This will be followed by a section, which will focus on the application of online CoPs. A great deal of the literature focuses on the significance of collaboration as a teaching and learning practice in virtual and e-learning environments. Subsequently there has been growing research emphasizing the importance of CoPs as a hub for information exchange, knowledge creation and organizational innovation. Online CoPs also have positive implications for teaching and learning practices. An online CoP provides teachers and learners with a participatory process that includes engaging, collaborating and sharing knowledge not simply acquiring it. This interaction can happen across communities and between resources.

This section will be followed by an explanation of the considerations that are needed when implementing an online CoP. Detail will be provided on the professional development of teachers and how an online CoP can provide an innovative method of delivering professional development, shifting the emphasis from traditional and conventional, face to face professional development courses and workshops, to learning in practice. Technology designers need to have a clear understanding of the goals, purpose and the needs of the online

CoP so that the level of usability is one which learners can enjoy and not find difficulties with. This section will also explore the importance of trust and acceptance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), as without those two components it is very hard to build a successful online CoP where learners can trust and accept each other.

The last section will explore the future trends associated with online CoPs. ICT is increasingly described as the 'fifth utility', the fact being we can pretty much no longer live, work or learn efficiently without an ICT infrastructure. There is a need for schools to 'personalize' pupils' learning to meet the demands of a 'knowledge based economy' where it will be possible to compete with the developing and global markets. The future benefits that could occur from online CoPs are based around increased collaboration with others rather leaving learners to develop on their own, and the ever-increasing technology that is allowing learners to communicate with others on so many levels.

BACKGROUND

The concept of a community of practice (CoP) began in the 1980s at the Institute for Research on Learning, which was funded by the Xerox Corporation (Daniel, Sarkar & O'Brien, 2004). From this there has been more research outlining the significance of CoPs as a centre point for its members for engagement, collaboration and the sharing of knowledge. The CoP can be a centre point to trade different types of information between its members. Etienne Wenger is recognized as the most knowledgeable and main theorist in CoPs. According to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) a CoP is:

"a community of practice is not just a Web site, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build

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