



Communities of Practice

Definition and Basics from www.ewenger.com/theory/ and the <http://www.macucc.org/resourcelinks/category/7>

The term "community of practice" was coined in the last two decades, even though the phenomenon it refers to is age-old. The concept has turned out to provide a useful perspective on knowing and learning. A growing number of people and organizations in various sectors are now focusing on communities of practice as a key to improving their performance.

This brief and general introduction examines what communities of practice are and why researchers and practitioners in so many different contexts find them useful as an approach to knowing and learning.

What are communities of practice?

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: **Communities of practice 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.**

A community of practice for Christian education/formation.

A group of 8-10 faith formation leaders/practitioners covenant to meet 6 times from August to June in a program year. (This might be face-to-face and virtual gatherings.)

Each group covenants to serve as both a safe space for mutual support and a learning community with an intentional and disciplined focus on the practices of the educational/formational ministry. A trained facilitator is responsible for convening the group, including all reminders, all group communications, follow-up with missing members, etc.

A facilitator also provides hospitality, keeps the agenda going and ensures that each member has an opportunity to participate in the conversation.

Typically, face-to-face group meetings could include:

- Devotion and prayer
- Check-in with members
- Discussion of a topic of common interest or case study drawn from the experience of members of the group
- An opportunity for group members to review and evaluate the meeting.

Virtual meetings or elements may include the same and:



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- Webinar
- Video conferencing
- Topic specific blogs etc.

How do communities of practice function? Communities develop their practice through a variety of activities. The following table provides a few typical examples:

<i>Problem solving</i>	"Can we work on the design of this event and brainstorm some ideas; I'm stuck."
<i>Requests for information</i>	"Where can I find information on sexuality education for 'tweens?'"
<i>Seeking experience</i>	"Has anyone dealt with a Sunday school volunteer in this situation?"
<i>Reusing assets</i>	"I have a proposal for a Communion formation opportunity for families you could adapt."
<i>Coordination and synergy</i>	"Can we combine our purchases of VBS giveaways to achieve bulk discounts?"
<i>Discussing developments</i>	"What do you think of the new Faith Practices Curriculum? Have you used the daily living?"
<i>Documentation projects</i>	"We have discussed this dilemma before. Can write it down once and share it with others?"
<i>Visits</i>	"Can we come and see your after-school program? We need to establish one at our church."
<i>Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps</i>	"What additional curricula should we consider? What are other groups using for confirmation?"

Communities of practice are not called that in all organizations. They are known by various names, such as learning networks, thematic groups, or other.

While they all have the three elements of a domain, a community, and a practice, they come in a variety of forms. Some are quite small; some are very large, often with a core group and many peripheral members. Some are local and some cover the globe. Some meet mainly face-to-face, some mostly online. Some are within an organization and some include members from various organizations. Some are formally recognized, often supported with a budget; and some are completely informal and even invisible.

Communities of practice have been around for as long as human beings have learned together. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies, we all belong to communities of practice, a number of them usually. In some we are core members. In many we are merely peripheral. And we travel through numerous communities over the course of our lives.



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In fact, communities of practice are everywhere. They are a familiar experience-so familiar perhaps that it often escapes our attention. Yet when it is given a name and brought into focus, it becomes a perspective that can help us understand our world better. In particular, it allows us to see past more obvious formal structures such as organizations, classrooms, or nations, and perceive the structures defined by engagement in practice and the informal learning that comes with it.