Building Communities of Practice in Higher Education

Co-creating, Collaborating and Enriching Working Cultures

EDITED BY

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Susanne Rose Clarke

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Drawing from a diverse range of expert voices within the field, this key work explores how communities of practice are an effective tool for supporting successful collaboration, whilst also creating the foundations for lasting institutional change.

By examining communities of practice through a variety of critical lenses, this book encourages readers to consider how strategies may be applied within their own institutions to support feelings of belonging, encourage teamwork, and inspire learning. Supported by both practical case studies and current research, contributors suggest strategies that readers can use to create their own effective communities of practice. Chapters explore topics including:

- Communities as a method of regeneration within universities
- Cultivation of knowledge through community collaboration
- Questions of power in transdisciplinary communities
- Mapping career pathways through communities of practice

Bringing together theory and practice, this is an essential resource for all involved in strategic planning, organisational development, and fostering a positive organisational culture within higher education.

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To all our amazing colleagues who have made working in Higher Education such a continual joy

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We also want to thank each of our contributing authors for their wisdom and generosity in sharing their knowledge and experiences of communities of practice (CoPs) in Higher Education.

Our gratitude to Bournemouth University for embracing humanising practice and CoPs as a way to enable excellence and for providing us with the space and support to complete this book and share our research and practice and to all our mentors and colleagues for helping us shape our ideas.

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1 Introduction

Camila Devis-Rozental

1.1 Rationale for this book

Writing this book through a global pandemic and meeting these authors remotely whilst forming meaningful relationships has been a rich experience. When Susanne and I set out to edit and write this book based on our previous work with some of its authors on the project funded by ODHE (Organisational Development in Higher Education) titled: Putting the heart back into Higher Education by reconnecting and learning from higher education communities of Practice to enable hybrid ways of working (Sinha et al. 2022), we had a dream. The dream was to be able to share our findings far and wide and to inspire and enable Higher Education professionals to explore communities of practice (CoPs) as possible spaces to learn and develop excellent practice. This book is the culmination of that.

In it, we offer a kaleidoscope of eclectic voices that reach further than we ever thought. Some chapters are autobiographical, some theoretical, others practical and some in the middle of that. The voice of these authors from various parts of the world shows an array of experiences of what is like to exist in higher education and to have CoPs as spaces where not only new knowledge is shared but also lived experiences enrich as we grow and develop our thinking and our way of being.

But before we delve into the chapters of this book, there are some recurring themes within this book, and we thought it would be good to define and explain these for context. We are aware that some of the chapters already include definitions but since this is not a sequential book where chapters link and follow from each other, but rather a collection of voices, we felt it is important to identify and define these themes here for a common understanding.

Table 1.1 Terminology

Acronym	Terms
CoP	Community of practice
CoPs	Communities of practice
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
HEIs	Higher education institutions

1.2 Higher Education

The first thing you will notice that we all have in common is that all the authors in this book have experience of working or researching in Higher Education (HE). Within the context of this book, HE is the space where qualifications for over 18s are achieved but also where researchers explore, inspect and create new knowledge that can change the world. HE takes place in universities or colleges, which are referred to as higher education institutions (HEIs).

HEIs are complex organisations with academics, researchers and professionals in many fields and normally have a hierarchical structure. In HEIs, there may be faculties, departments, research teams, programme teams, unit teams, leadership teams and many other types of groups. These groups normally work closely within them and sometimes in collaboration with some of the other teams. In an ideal HEI, all these groups would be connected with each other and work collaboratively. This is not always the case for many reasons, not least the size of HEIs. Nevertheless, within HEIs, people gather in formal spaces such as programme meetings, exam boards and other important meetings necessary for the efficiency of the HEI.

Social gatherings may also happen in staff rooms, if there are any, but also in other common spaces, cafeterias and sometimes even the water cooler or the corridor. These meetings are especially important to develop meaningful relationships with others, sometimes form collaborations and can benefit people's wellbeing too.

In HE, CoPs exist on a third space. CoPs are not formal meetings with an agenda, neither a social gathering to catch up. Third spaces are environments where knowledge boundaries sometimes blur, where people's expertise and input very much depend not only on their professional practice but also on their personal identity, their sense of purpose and their interests. In these spaces, there are no hierarchies, everyone is welcomed and has the

same opportunities to share their expertise and lived experience, if related to the CoP's common's interest.

1.3 What are CoPs?

CoPs are collective learning spaces where individuals with a common interest share their knowledge. CoPs are distinct from other type of groups or gatherings such as networks or team meetings. The reason for this is that CoPs enable to develop a shared identity around a collective interest with the aim to impact positively on practice. According to Wenger (2011), the domain, the community and the practice are key ingredients of a CoP. The domain would be the shared interest regardless of one's expertise. The community would then be the members pursuing their interest in that domain. The practice would be the shared emerging resources, tools, stories or anything else that can impact on practice and have been developed by those in a CoP.

The term CoP was coined by Anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Wenger 2011). CoPs emerge from social learning theory which
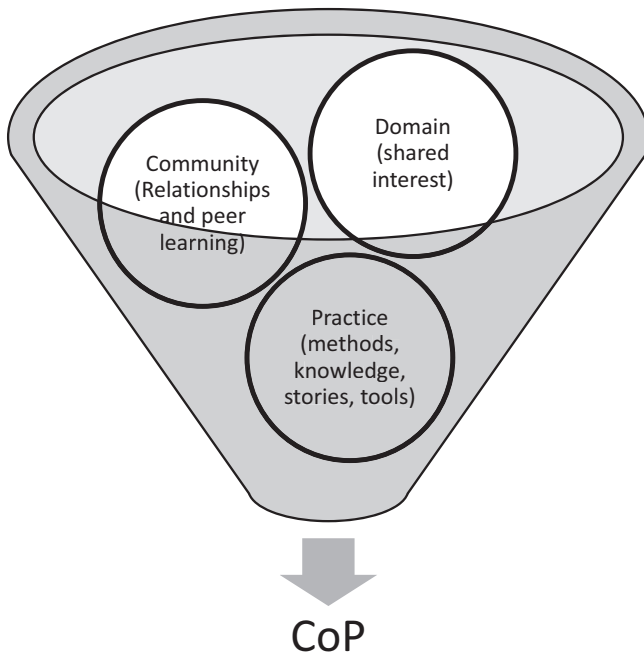

Figure 1.1 Ingredients of a CoP.

emphasises interactions with others as key to learning. By mutually engaging with each other, members of a CoP can gain valuable insights that can impact on their practice. Within the context of social learning theory, people learn from others by interacting, observing and sometimes imitating others. Consequently, CoPs offer excellent opportunities to develop skills that go beyond those learned through that common interest. Prosocial behaviours, negotiation skills, self-awareness and confidence can all be developed by attending a CoP. We would suggest that CoPs go beyond that. They can also play a part in shaping cultures and mindset.

CoPs also correlate to social constructivism emphasising the importance of collaboration and constructing knowledge with others. Lev Vygotsky (1978), the Russian psychologist and father of sociocultural theory, emphasised the importance of the cultural context in which people learn. He argued that any cognitive process is influenced by our culture. Indeed culture, values and behaviours shape how we think. This is true to our own but also that of others when we share spaces and learn from each other. In this sense, an organisation's culture would also impact on the learning that happens and why.

Vygotsky also introduced the idea of a Zone of Proximal Development (1978). The spaces between what an individual can learn by themselves and what they can learn with the support of a more knowledgeable adult. And although his theories were specifically developed for child development. In recent years, researchers have identified how his views can also be applied to adults. In the case of the ZPD, it would be a more knowledgeable other. In fact, we argue that it can just be another, not necessarily more knowledgeable but with a different type of knowledge. And it is here where CoPs fit perfectly. In a CoP, there are no hierarchies and there is an understanding between members that there is no more or less knowledge but different knowledge that we can all share and that will help each person learn something new.

1.4 How are CoPs different to other groups?

The following table adapted from Bultoc et al. (2021) shows how CoPs are different from other types of groups or teams and some of their defining characteristics.

Table 1.2 How a CoP is different (adapted from Bultoc et al. 2021)

	What is the purpose?	What holds it together?	How long does it last?
Community of Practice	**To produce**, extend and exchange knowledge and to develop members' capabilities	Passion, commitment and identification with the group's expertise	As long as there is interest in maintaining the group, the subject and the learning
Formal Work Group	To deliver a product or service	Job requirements and common goals	Until the next organisation
Project Team	To accomplish a specific task	The project's milestones and goals	Until the project has been completed
Informal network	To collect and pass on business information	Mutual needs	As long as people have reason to connect

1.5 CoPs as enablers of a new way of building social capital

Although social capital in itself seems to be a good thing as it signals to the common values that help us work together for a common goal, inherently they exclude those who don't have access or opportunities to share that common goal, mostly marginalised or discriminated groups. This homogeneity which perpetuates the status quo by being exclusive misses opportunities for diverse types of knowledge sharing and creation. Diverse groups have many benefits, they improve productivity, enable more creativity and can even mitigate risk. CoPs can also be spaces where people can use their strengths, share their passion and become positive energisers that enhance others' experience and are catalysts of positive change (Clarke 2020).

CoPs can enable social capital, and they can do it in a more inclusive way. As there isn't any inherent limiting criteria to join a CoP, providing you have access to the knowledge that the CoP exists, people from diverse

backgrounds, with different types of knowledge, intersectionality and wanting to be part of that common interest will always be welcome. Consequently, CoPs can become the main differentiator between universities, due to their facilitation of internal mobilisation, knowledge and alignment, whilst being inclusive and equitable, enabling all group members to develop a sense of belonging.

This may mean that CoPs must remain reflective and aware of any power inequity so each individual can flourish whilst sharing this third space. Some of the chapters in this book explore these issues in more depth with relevant examples to illustrate why social justice must be at the forefront of those developing the CoP.

In the following section, we will briefly present the chapters' main ideas so you get a feeling about what will be explored in each of them.

1.6 Organisation of the book

In this chapter, we have welcomed you onto our space and given you some overarching definitions and themes that will permeate the chapters of this book. You will find that many of the chapters include a definition of a CoP, we have left these as they will make sense within the context of each chapter, and each presents the same theme from a different viewpoint. Each chapter is different and has been written by authors from different fields, from different countries, with different lived experiences and diverse voices. We wanted to keep them distinct so you will notice different types of writing and exploring ideas.

Chapter 2 explores the notion of CoPs as a mechanism for regenerating universities. In the chapter Sinha explores how CoPs, by building technical and interpersonal skills, can transform higher education. She introduces relevant theories and explores how these can provide a roadmap for HEIs to thrive. Sinha invites us to follow a road map for change and she offers templates, tools and questions to reflect specifically on how universities must become more sustainable and the role that CoPs can play to enable this.

In Chapter 3, Devis-Rozental explores CoPs as enablers of diverse social capital and personal development. She applies the eight dimensions of the humanising framework to demonstrate how each of the forms of humanisation and dehumanisation can be experienced within CoPs, and how

by applying the framework when developing a CoP, a more humanised approach can be achieved to enable individuals to flourish and thrive.

Chapter 4 questions whether people from different fields of expertise or working cultures are catalysts or barriers to meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration. In this chapter, Clarke and Clarke explore this through a case study and invite the reader to envisage CoPs through the Garden metaphor as fertile grounds for sharing and creating knowledge.

In Chapter 5, Roper and Devis-Rozental explore organisational structures in Higher Education and how these should be challenged in an attempt to disrupt the status quo and break down silos. By exploring CoPs as enablers of transdisciplinary and network building, the chapter will provide examples of how an established CoP has led to key developments of collegiality and practice improvement.

Chapter 6 explores how CoPs can be pathways to enable strategic alignment, disrupting hierarchies and mapping pathways for professional development. Bultoc argues that CoPs maximise opportunities for influencing strategy and enable new ways of working and cultural change.

Ndaka and Makiwa provide a powerful narrative in Chapter 7 about their own lived experience of epistemic injustice within CoPs. In their chapter, they acknowledge how transdisciplinary can be a source of co-creation providing power relations are acknowledged and explicitly tackled from the beginning, so everyone feels safe and able to contribute and therefore have a positive experience.

In Chapter 8, Hubbard explores the shared characteristics of high-performing teams and CoPs with the aim of identifying the positive characteristics of a CoP and how these can impact on continuous improvement, inclusion and engagement whilst aligning to the strategic goals of the HEI.

Scott in Chapter 9 explains how CoPs can balance theory and practice and how they can enrich an individual's experiences. Through a case study of the Drawing Edges CoP, she explores themes around empowerment, interdisciplinarity and experimentation with art as a conduit. The chapter provides illustrations developed through the CoP.

Finally, in Chapter 10, my co-editor Susanne concludes this book with an overview of our journey. She also makes a call to action to develop more CoPs to enable HEIs to flourish as those within it work together to make this world a better place.

1.7 Final thoughts

Each of these authors have shared their expertise, knowledge and lived experience with generosity and wisdom. You will find references to theory, vulnerable moments, excellent practice and chapters that have been written with an embodied relational understanding by intrinsically weaving throughout their narrative their Head (the author's knowledge and expertise), their Hand (the author's practice and way of doing things) and their Heart (the author's insights, feelings and lived experiences) (Devis-Rozental 2018, 2020). There are important recurring themes around equity, diversity, inclusion, social justice, sustainability, cross-cultural collaboration and many other prosocial ideas key to enhance practice and our own working environments. Now that you know what this book is about, I hope you enjoy it and find it useful on your journey to learning about, or, developing CoPs in HE.

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2 Communities of practice as a mechanism for regenerating universities

Tammi Sinha

2.1 Introduction

Many higher education institutions (HEIs) include sustainable development as a key strategic aim, and many are making excellent progress. This chapter connects this important aim with the establishment of communities of practice (CoPs) as a proven approach to developing and sharing knowledge.

This chapter also offers an approach focusing on people first, bringing together a road map to act as a "straw wo/man'" for colleagues to review, reflect, and adapt their own practice in this area. A road map for change is presented, with templates, tools, and questions offered (See figure 2.1).

2.2 Part 1: people: how organisations enable change through their people and communities of practice

2.2.1 Communities of practice

Many universities have embraced the concept of "communities of practice" (CoPs) as a way of developing knowledge and enabling change within their institutions. The original definition of a CoP by Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) brings together the supportive structure of a CoP in engendering change:

> A set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time…
> A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence