

Practicing Community

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Abstract

Practicing Community stresses the community aspect of Communities of Practice (CoPs), unlike the practice emphasis appearing in the preponderance of extant literature. Through vignettes depicting events, situations, and behaviour under a particular set of circumstances at various points in their developmental stages (life cycle), *Practicing Community* illuminates what it means to be a part of a Community of Practice. CoPs are vital, thriving communities providing substance and meaning to their members, while lending focus and leverage to practice improvement, community development, and organisational change. *Practicing Community* draws on an extensive review of the literature on and related to Communities of Practice, and on more than a decade working in and with CoPs, teams, and work groups.

Prologue

Background and Context

Practicing Community is an intentional play on words, a title evoking a multiplicity of images and meanings and suggesting the complexity and ambiguity of the central topic entertained in the paper you are about to read. The paper concerns Communities of Practice; but ranges widely, addressing topics important in their own right, including knowledge and knowing, learning and professional development, organisational effectiveness and change, and group dynamics, particularly (but not exclusively) leadership and communications. In this sense, the construct Communities of Practice provides more of a central organising theme than a specific and narrow focus.

An underlying theme of this paper is community: what community *means* within the context of work groups, firstly, but also any kind of group assembled to achieve a shared purpose (including *building community* and *community development*). By community the author does not mean “a collection of individuals” (see below), but the *feeling* of community. Spiritual groups may refer to “communion” as an expression of meaningful relationships amongst participants. Academicians speak of “collegiality” to express the spirit and practice of community.¹ Soldiers term community as *esprit de corps*, camaraderie, or “mateship.” This paper is not a treatise on community, but it is the author’s opinion that Communities of Practice are the most fulfilling when meaningful community is discovered or achieved.² Whether or not they are the most effective when the feeling of community is high may be open to debate, but a combination of attributes of community such as commitment; focus on a shared purpose; complementary skills, abilities, knowledge, and perspective; and on-going support and nourishment will – in the long run – enable a group to succeed more often than not.

Some working definitions of community and practice are provided, immediately below, and in the box at right, to get us started.

Community

Everyone may (and, perhaps, should) have his or her own definition and understanding of community. For the purposes of this paper, a community may exist in some form (as in a practising community) or it may exist as only a potential community. The author is currently an active, core member in two Communities of Practice, a peripheral member in a couple of others, and a potential member of at least one prospective Community of Practice.

Some aspects of community worth considering include:

1. Community exists in a general sense, almost as a place and including all the people in that space (as in a neighbourhood or a university campus). There is little, necessarily, that ties individuals co-existing in this type of

¹ The notions of colleague and collegiality are particular, though not exclusive domains in academia; and, though beyond the scope of this present paper, worth further investigation and elaboration. For further reference and with relevance to this paper, refer to Marlow, Kyed, and Connors (2005), who discuss and distinguish collegiality, collaboration, and *kuleana* (Hawaiian for trust, responsibility, caring, and advocacy); and to Waters (1989) who explores collegiality from a Weberian, deeply sociological perspective.

² Such community can be built (that is, not by mere happenstance), as demonstrated amongst some of the groups observed leading up to the writing of this paper. How they built – intentional or emergent – is described in the vignettes comprising the body of this paper.

community together as a community. This depiction is similar to society (all human beings as a group), as opposed to societies (see 2, below).

2. Community exists amongst individuals who share common interests and pursuits, even if they don't know each other: all teachers; all lawyers. This is still community in the general sense, as in 1, above. "Members" could be widely dispersed or live and work in proximity of one another. While they might have things in common, there cannot be the feeling that comes about through close association, as might develop over time when people work together.

3. Community exists as a set of feelings and more meaningful associations amongst people. This is community based on relationships and mutual support, united by purpose or shared objectives, and complemented by compatible values and ways of working together. People know when there is a sense of community; likewise, they feel its absence. People may have varying needs and expectations for community, but empirical evidence tends to support the view that people seek community and are healthier, happier, and more productive when they have it (Bell, 2004; Fine, 2006; Waddock, 1999).

Practicing Community

Practicing Community is more than just the title of this paper. It is a concept pregnant with meaning, and rich in hope, optimism, and aspiration. Practicing Community is a deliberate and conscious effort to create the conditions for fulfilling and effective working relationships, while achieving some agreed upon task or working toward common aims. Practicing Community implies diligence and persistence, as healthy and effective working relationships are neither guaranteed nor easy. It means continually striving to improve both task performance and working relationships. Practicing Community is a commitment to the community and making it a better place for its members; it is not just a case of "we are here to do a job," but "we are doing something important together, and our experience of shared effort and accomplishment is of value in its own right (perhaps even more meaningful and important than the job itself)."³

Working Definitions

Practice (noun) – as in one's discipline, trade, or business; what one does, such as teaching (something all teachers do) or plumbing (something only plumbers do). A teacher might be a chemist, thus potentially belonging to the "chemist" trade, as well as to the teaching vocation. Also as a noun, practice connotes the location of one's work (a physician's practice).

Practised (adjective) – one skilled and accomplished in his or her field; an expert.

Practicing (verb) – to work at; to perform repeatedly to develop skill and expertise; to apply oneself to learning. To be involved in on a regular basis.

Practising (adjective) – Participating in or undertaking a task, activity, or profession on a regular basis, as in a practising attorney. One may be practicing the piano and be a practising pianist.

Community – (See elaborations at left) 1. All people defined by location or place (a neighbourhood). 2. All people of a certain ilk within a physical or virtual space. 3. The community as used here: a social network or grouping bound by some set of common values, vision or ideal, purpose and objectives. There may be a shared language, set of behaviours and skills, and similarity in approaches and tools to work.

Communities and Reflective Learning

In the communities with which the author has been affiliated in recent years, *Practicing Community* involved, amongst other things, active reflection, punctuations in work activity to collectively critique work performance or other group activity and to draw lessons learnt from those shared reflections. There is a stimulating body of research on reflection and reflective practice in the management and management education literatures (Daudelin, 1996; Grant, 2001; Schön, 1983). However, this qualitative approach is not addressed widely in scientific journals, which have tended to focus on quantitative methods.

Realigning the Focus towards Community

The best-kept secret of Communities of Practice is the community part. The overwhelming emphasis in the literature reviewed for this paper is on the practice aspect—the work (task or purpose) for which the CoP has been brought together. There are various possible and legitimate explanations for this phenomenon, but the fact remains that community is neglected. And, that is a missed opportunity. In the communities this author has worked with, while task achievement or at least a concrete purpose was always on members' minds and occupied much of their time, especially in early stages, what they seemed to appreciate most was the sense of community they experienced.

Orientation to the Body of the Paper

This paper takes the reader into the midst of group life, sometimes dramatic, sometimes banal; at face, patently, if deceptively self-evident, but fascinating and unfathomable when visited beneath the surface. It attempts to reveal the reality and consider the mystery of interactive behaviour in groups pursuing shared goals with the best of intentions.

³ These quotes reflect a shift in attitudes characteristic of some of the individuals who became involved in Communities of Practice. Worthy of note is Liedtka's (1999) bold invocation to merge notions of community with business, as is Pemberton, Mavin, and Stalker's (2007) critique of the competing and ambiguous portrayals of community and practice in the literature.

There are numerous tensions and paradoxes in group life. One that impacts this paper is the wish (no doubt shared by some readers) to “de-mystify” human behaviour in groups—in this case to provide the definitive guide to setting up and sustaining Communities of Practice. Yet, human behaviour is eminently complex. Often what makes Communities of Practice and other forms of group activity so rewarding and effective is inexplicable. There are no hard and fast rules. Every situation is different. It may be the mystery and magic of group work that allows groups to transcend the obvious and business as usual; and in so doing to achieve innovation and sustained high-performance.

That said, there is no reason to discontinue speculating and reflecting upon group activity and process—what makes a specific group more or less effective given its particular circumstances. This paper presents actual situations with as much detail as possible regarding what happened. Thus, readers can put themselves into the picture, feel what it was like, and imagine what they would have done. Where prescriptions may be of little value (and, perhaps, even counterproductive), thinking through actions, alternatives, and consequences can be illuminating.

Purpose. This paper sets out to provide an overview of how Communities of Practice establish, evolve, and sustain themselves; how they operate on a day-to-day basis, and why. The intent is to show something of the complexity and ambiguity of work group behaviour, with an attempt to explain success and failure. While the literature is rife with the promise and potential of Communities of Practice, little is said about why or how they become viable and productive. *Practicing Community* seeks to emphasise that Communities of Practice can neither be simply defined and explained, nor easily managed or controlled. In the best of cases they are self-organising and creative entities, with vast potential for change. Too easily, they fail. In neither case does management intervention, per se, ensure a given CoP will survive in the long run. The potential for viability lies within most [potential] Communities of Practice. The key is to create the conditions wherein that potential is realised. This paper suggests some strategies for enabling groups to identify and capitalise upon their inherent abilities.

Audience. *Practicing Community* is suited for both academics and practitioners. It augments traditional perspectives on Communities of Practice, suggesting new directions for research and a more realistic way of conceiving CoPs in terms of how they work and their potential. Those involved with Communities of Practice may find the vignettes particularly informative. Those concerned with community development and / or organisational development and change may find the mechanism of Communities of Practice and the process of CoP development especially suited to their work. *The process is the solution* (see Hays, in press). See, also, the caveats below regarding academics and practitioners.

Sections. The paper is simply divided into the following sections: Prologue, Engaging Communities of Practice, Glance into the Relevant Literature, COPS Under the Radar, Discussion and Analysis, and Concluding Remarks. Implications emerging from the research on which this paper is based and with reference to the vignettes, in particular, are covered primarily in the analysis of the vignettes, while directions for further research are presented in Concluding Remarks.

Scientific Grounding. Many journal articles and selected books have been reviewed in preparing for and in the course of writing this paper, the more germane of which are included as references and all of which contribute in many ways to what the author has chosen to write about, and how. It is not the intent of this paper to recapitulate or distil the huge body of literature on Communities of Practice and associated aspects. Instead, it is the author's wish to write from first-hand experience and observation.

Engaging Communities of Practice

In a relatively short period of time, Communities of Practice (CoPs) have evolved from a theoretical concept with a small, if devoted, following to a set of viable, practical organisational forms (structures) of interest to practitioners and academics alike. There have been at least five hundred articles published in scholarly journals concerning CoPs since 1993, with the bulk of them coming out since 2001.⁴

John Brown and Paul Duguid are credited with introducing the subject of Communities of Practice in their impressive article in *Organization Science* appearing in 1991.⁵ Before Communities of Practice became common parlance amongst organisational researchers, work on which they are based concerned informal workplace learning. Now-famous studies mark the beginnings of the era of Communities of Practice. Well worth reading are: Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) and Orr (1996). Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave are amongst the most-often cited authors relating to CoPs [(Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002; Wenger and Snyder, 2000) and (Lave and Wenger, 1991)].

⁴ The author's interest in and involvement with Communities of Practice extends as far back as 1998 when the global information technology company he worked for implemented a (then) new system for managing corporate knowledge and connecting individuals across its internationally-distributed business units. Membership on several “communities of interest” and the global Organisational Change Management Expert Group provided an intimate introduction to at least one version of a Knowledge Management system, parallel organisational structures based on communities, and technologically-assisted virtual collaboration (and earned a nice T-shirt emblazoned with a gold key).

⁵ Lave and Wenger are also credited with coining the term in their 1991 text on situated learning.

The impact and value of social networks in acculturating individuals into a professional discipline or trade, if not an organisation, and promoting knowledge and skill development are widely discussed in the literature. The attendant processes appear to be relatively well understood. And, while exceeding the scope of this paper, those wishing to pursue the topic farther might refer to some of the more recent interesting and relevant papers reviewed as background for this treatise; here is a sample from a range of perspectives and disciplines:

Higher Education / On-line Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shay (2004) • Stacey, Smith, and Barty (2004) • Lesham (2007)
Higher Education / Vocational Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boud and Middleton (2003)
Higher Education and Public Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mittendorf, Geijssel, Hoeve, de Laat, and Nieuwenhuis (2006)
Public Health / Health Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popay, Mallinson, and Kowarzik (2004) • Smith (2005)
Construction Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gherardi, Nicolini, and Odella (1998)
Theory-Based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tywoniak (2007)
Anthropology Early Childhood Development Social Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bradley (2004) • Timmons Flores (2007)
Pharmacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Austin and Duncan-Hewitt (2005)
Public Defenders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hara and Schwen (2006)
Environment / Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jørgensen and Hagelskjær Lauridsen (2005)
Professional Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pastors (2007)

Table 1. Overview of Journal Articles Covering Social Learning and Acculturation Aspects of Communities of Practice.

Closely related to the foundational social learning aspects of Communities of Practice are knowledge theories that underlie much of the work on CoPs. Two of the more thorough expositions reviewed for this paper are Thompson (2005), who explores epistemic parameters of CoPs, and Lorenz (2001), who examines cognitive foundations for theories of organisational behaviour. The latter also considers problem-solving behaviour in Communities of Practice. Oliver and Reddy Kandadi (2006) explicate “knowledge culture” in organisations, a topic of considerable interest to this author⁶ (see, also, Persaud, Kumar, and Kumar, 2001). In homage to Schön, Lichtenstein discusses generative knowledge, as well as a range of subjects of relevance to this paper, in his insightful article published in 2000. With respect to Communities of Practice and Organisational Learning more broadly, the following papers are interesting and insightful: Hong and Kuo (1999), Bierly, Kessler, and Christensen (2000), San Segundo Miguel (2002), and Österberg (2004).

Communities of Practice have generally been conceived of as communities (groups) of practitioners, employees who are united by common practice interests and needs, say plumbers or IT professionals. Practice may apply to any trade or profession, but membership in a CoP is usually considered to be confined to the specific discipline.⁷ People learn the trade and develop discipline-related skills within the “community.” The community assists to acculturate individuals into the trade (as well as into the employing organisation), inculcating essential values, norms, knowledge, and skills (albeit oftentimes implicitly or tacitly). While early understanding about Communities of Practice centred around their function in informal workplace learning (see, Brown and Duguid, 1991), interpretations of their purpose, composition, and benefits appear to have broadened⁸ (Pavlin, 2006).

⁶ See “Cultures for Learning in Organisations” in Hays (in press) *CM+ Roadmap to Organisational Development and Change*. Canberra: Argos.

⁷ Variants are increasingly appearing, including task-based CoPs (Juriado and Gustafsson, 2007), multi-functional and interdisciplinary (Garavan, Carbery, and Murphy, 2007; Peile and Briner, 2001), and inter-organisational (Garavan, Carbery, and Murphy, 2007; Soekijad, Huis in ‘t Veld, and Enserink, 2004).

⁸ Jørgensen and Hagelskjær Lauridsen (2005) note the vital need for cross-disciplinary Communities of Practice in the environmental arena. Juriado and Gustafsson (2007) examine emergent / temporary Communities of Practice for projects involving inter-organisational partnerships.

This paper departs from seminal depictions of Communities of Practice. For example, the CoPs described herein and on which the author's speculations and implications are presented were primarily cross-functional. That is, they consisted of heterogeneous employees, representing multiple skill sets, disciplines, levels, and units, rather than homogenous groups of individuals. Thus, the CoPs, in this case, provide examples of effective working mechanisms that incorporate diverse stakeholders and capitalise upon their range of skills, knowledge, and access. It should be noted that this diversity often posed difficulties in working together, with the resolution of or failure to resolve issues having substantial impact on group operation, effectiveness, morale, and commitment.

Another differentiator from the way Communities of Practice are typically conceived is that the CoPs focussed upon in this study were not mandated by or even initially formally recognised as legitimate organisational units. While they did not spontaneously emerge from the ether on their own, as described below, they were generally "grass roots" formations of individuals representing various stakeholder interests. Membership was voluntary, and objectives, priorities, and strategies were all self-generated and moderated. While interest in CoP activities increased corporately over time, executives did not monitor performance or intervene in CoP affairs, at least not until requested to do so, as was the case, later, when additional resources were sought. In this respect, the CoPs reported on here may be unlike Communities of Practice that are chartered corporately. Implications of this are discussed in Concluding Remarks, below. One key finding of note, however, is that Communities of Practice can – of their own volition – establish and sustain themselves, evolving to be potent forces for change.⁹

Finally, the CoPs comprising the groups studied and reported upon here tended to be at the outset *task*-based, as opposed to *practice*-based. That is, members joined for the collective purpose of achieving some specific end or set of aims, best exemplified by the development and fielding of a new Knowledge Management (KM) system. This is important because virtually all the CoPs investigated floundered without a task to focus their efforts. Members and potential joiners felt no need to be part of a group that had no specific and concrete objectives. Interestingly, once some members got "stuck into it," the need for tangible tasks gave way to other motivations for remaining in their communities. Some of these more qualitative and less-tangible motivators are listed under "benefits" below, and covered more fully in Discussion and Analysis. This pervasive behaviour may relate to a developmental stage in the CoP life cycle (Gongla and Rizzuto, 2001; Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob, 2005; Hays, 2008a)¹⁰, and have significant implications for CoP establishment.

Estimating the scope of the actual deployment of Communities of Practice across industries and around the globe remains to be done, but indications in the literature suggest widespread and rapid growth. The dramatic increase of Communities of Practice is probably initially related to their potential to promote Knowledge Management and organisational learning. These related areas have experienced astronomical growth since the mid-1990s, which may help to explain the simultaneous growth of CoPs. The KM community¹¹ was quick to embrace Communities of Practice as one strategy to build and capitalise on corporate knowledge,¹² perhaps in recognition of the difficulty in eliciting and making available tacit knowledge—that part of essential knowledge that resides in peoples' heads (Ardichvili, et al, 2006; Blair, 2002; Stapleton, Smith, and Murphy, 2005). Working in groups gives people access to *fonts of knowledge* whose expertise is not codified or readily transmissible through packaged training.

It seems safe to say that the original (and, perhaps, still prevailing) view of Communities of Practice emphasises the *practice* part. While not denying the value of and focus on the *practice* aspects of Communities of Practice, this paper emphasises the *community* part. As CoP members, themselves, increasingly noted, it was within and through the community that individuals found their voice, felt part of something bigger, recognised that they were growing as individuals, began to appreciate their own and each other's individuality within the diverse group, and felt supported—some for the very first time.¹³

Benefits

The benefits of Communities of Practice, suggested, are not limited to KM applications or even more broadly organisational learning. They offer many potential advantages. Some presented in this paper, as observed across a range of Communities of Practice, teams, and community-building initiatives, include:

⁹ Zorfass and Keefe Rivero (2005) document how CoPs promote technology integration in the education sector.

¹⁰ Based on a thorough review of the literature and his own research on high-performance, self-directing teams and Communities of Practice, Hays (2008a) identifies four phases of CoP development: Getting Started, Coming Around, Almost There, and Highly Self-Directing, each with its own appropriate level and kind of facilitation or external leadership.

¹¹ Note the use of "community" as understood in community type two, as defined in the prologue, a usage so casual as to have not been noticed through many edits and proofreads.

¹² The author identified over 100 research articles in the Knowledge Management arena dealing with aspects of Communities of Practice, exemplified by Ali (2001), Iverson and McPhee (2002), Kimble and Hildreth (2005), Martin, et al (2005), Peyravi, Pashaei, and Taghiyareh (2007), and Zimitat (2007).

¹³ It also is the case that the nature of the Communities of Practice discussed here bears little resemblance to the original conception—naturally-occurring, informal work groups organised around a trade or profession; an implication raised in Concluding Remarks.

- Developing a broad platform of personal and professional skills, not the least of which is leadership, which exceeds the narrow view of practice and informal workplace learning.
- Fostering a general sense of community and cooperation amongst a diverse range of stakeholders.
- Building identification and a sense of belonging with individuals, groups, and the organisation.
- Promoting organisational change and innovation. Serving as a platform for community development.
- Helping employees find greater meaning in their work.

Some Example CoPs

2006 – 2008 was an intense period for establishing and working with Communities of Practice at or associated with the author's affiliated research intensive university, and in public and private organisations in the vicinity. They came in many shapes and sizes, from formally chartered to informal and voluntary. Because of their potential for "grass roots" change, some of the more interesting and fruitful CoPs were those assembled to achieve various ends as determined primarily by members and potential members. When a post-graduate class, for example, was assigned a project to build community and improve quality of the learning experience at the university, the group determined what it would work on and how, becoming a self-acknowledged community in the process.

In other cases, Communities of Practice were established along common interest lines, such as sustainability or service delivery, most being cross-functional—populated by employees from different units and having a range of complementary skills, abilities, and knowledge. Membership in the CoPs was generally voluntary, there being no formal inducements or rewards for participation. Most members initially joined a CoP because they saw the potential value of uniting efforts toward achievement of some particular task or objective. Over time – for some – membership took on a life of its own; that is, participation had more to offer than task achievement alone. In some cases, people chose to stay and "reinvent" the community once its major objective was achieved.

In 2006, there were several Communities of Practice, including working groups that could be considered to be or to become CoPs), and a dozen target groups or topic areas for which CoPs might be convened. Some of these groups became thriving CoPs over time, some failed to materialise, and a new and unexpected CoP formed out of the ongoing work. The emergence of this new and unexpected CoP, the way it operated, its evolution, and its achievements provide perhaps the most interesting insight into Communities of Practice. This group – for the purposes of this paper and for reasons detailed below – may be called the MetaCOP. Its members were representatives of other Communities of Practice.¹⁴ During its evolution, the role of MetaCOP was to serve as a support group, incubator of collaborative and leadership skills, and "think tank" (problem-solving group), all intended to enable individual members to become more effective in their respective CoPs and to accelerate development of Communities of Practice more broadly. Emergence of MetaCOP is a significant outcome, with vast potential to leverage Communities of Practice. There is essentially nothing similar discussed in the literature.

Critical Success Factors

Conventional wisdom avers that Communities of Practice require considerable organisational support and formal sponsorship / leaders' championship. Support for this in published research is sparse, something the author finds intriguing, particularly given the countless (and predictable) assertions in the literatures on organisational change and organisational learning that little happens without it (see, for example, James, 2005; LeBrasseur, Whissell, and Ojha, 2005, Smith, 2003).

Organisational systems need to be aligned with Communities of Practice to permit employees to work on and devote substantial amounts of time to them (Oliver and Reddy Kandadi, 2006; Prewitt, 2003). For example, an employee needs to be legitimately freed to work on one or more CoP, and formally recognised for that work. Participation and expectations might be included in role statements or position descriptions, and performance management and reward systems adjusted accordingly (Bartol and Srivastava, 2002). Failure to attend to these principles would thwart efforts to promote participation, knowledge-sharing, and other desired forms of collaboration. Amongst the CoPs forming in the Australian Tax Office (ATO), for example, is one comprised of employees who have KM training and experience to assist the organisation in managing succession planning. One current issue for this CoP is that participation is entirely voluntary and outside employees' job description. Members need to obtain permission from their managers to join and work on it. The CoP is recognised as doing valuable work, but has no formal imprimatur to exist.

¹⁴ The only reference to a similar structure found in the literature is Ward's (2000) Community of Practice of "boundary spanners" – representatives of various other CoPs. One government department experimented with a "managers' CoP." The idea was to leverage various Communities of Practice / CoP initiatives by uniting team leaders into a community of their own. While the measure was appreciated for improving communications, it was judged by members as formal and "blocked," replicating the organisation's hierarchical and risk-adverse culture. It was a management (practice) element, as opposed to a community.

Interestingly, ATO has other CoPs that enjoy strong support from executives and that are widely considered innovative and creative. These include various communities for designers, usability researchers, business analysts, and other specialist technical roles. There are opportunities for cross-CoP communication and collaboration, including links with CoPs in other public and private sector organisations. One possible explanation for the difference in enterprise-wide support may be due to the closer alignment of these CoPs to organisational capability frameworks and defined corporate outcomes. There may be a better line of sight between the work in these CoPs and the realisation of corporate goals. Although commitment of resources is not provided, contribution and value are more widely recognised, and the members undertake CoP activities knowing they have senior management support.

Prevalent amongst the author's colleagues is the belief that the formal commitment of organisational resources to Communities of Practice is one of (if not *the*) key Critical Success Factors (Rockart, 1986). An example from the work discussed here is the provision of resource persons to the various Communities of Practice. These resource persons provided [presumably] crucial facilitation¹⁵ and administrative support to communities. The CoPs might well not have survived without this on-going support at no cost to themselves. This said, over time, most of the Communities of Practice developed their own capabilities for self-governance and management. They exhibited high levels of organisation skills, including planning and coordinating.

It follows that one of the most powerful attributes of an effective Community of Practice is its capacity to sustain and govern itself. Having witnessed both dramatic personal growth amongst CoP members¹⁶ and organisational achievements carried out by them, in no way directed from corporate executives, the author is convinced that – at least under certain conditions – Communities of Practice can be powerful forces for change. They can, for example, be a “grass roots” structure for community development or institutional change. The CoPs with which the author worked provided environments supporting and promoting personal growth and professional development, and accorded the platform and leverage needed to accomplish important tasks. They were unsupervised, essentially setting their own agenda and managing their own affairs.

Given the above, Communities of Practice offer great promise. This is especially the case where employee or other stakeholder commitment and involvement are sought, and where no one best way is known or prescribed. Their potential flexibility, creativity, and autonomy equip them to be responsive and proactive. At the same time, Communities of Practice pose some measure of risk. Their very self-directed nature means that they may determine objectives and undertake courses of action that are inconsistent with corporate priorities, diverting needed resources; this may lead some managers or organisations to resist or reject CoPs. While there is always some risk involved when an individual or group is empowered to act, it is probably the case that the benefits outweigh the costs in the long run.

Subversive CoPs?

It should be said that the Communities of Practice comprising the data set for this paper were populated primarily by volunteers; that is, members were employees who voluntarily joined one or more CoPs. While all members were employed by the same large institution, they represented various departments. Serving on the Communities of Practice permitted members to become acquainted with others they probably would not have otherwise had opportunity to meet, and to work on initiatives that cut across the organisation but in which everyone had a stake. In many ways, the Communities of Practice were a parallel organisational structure (Shani and Eberhardt, 1987; Von Wartburg, Rost, and Teichert, 2006), outside the normal hierarchy. Initially overlooked, this proved to be an important factor in how the CoPs developed and worked. The tension between the corporate hierarchy and the self-governing nature of the CoPs, in particular, the emergence of leadership within the CoPs was a significant issue.¹⁷ Interestingly – and while no one would admit to premeditation – some Community of Practice members began to speak proudly and optimistically of a “subversive” quality to CoPs and their effects.

The term never grew on the author, but it is probably this quality of “subversiveness” that enabled the internal and external change witnessed. Neither initially deliberate, nor implying anything particularly malevolent, destructive, or misguided, the author surmises subversive to have meant “going outside the normal channels to get things done” and “finding from within the resources (including leadership) to get the job done.” Subversion, in these cases, also meant

¹⁵ Facilitator roles and functions are discussed in numerous sources, with relevant portrayals in Raelin (2006) and Tarmizi, de Vreede, and Zigurs (2007). See also Feyerherm (1994) who conceives of shared leadership as facilitation—the complementary expression of a range of constructive behaviours.

¹⁶ Here the author includes himself, as well. Confronted almost daily with his own fallibilities and inadequacies, in areas such as listening, facilitation, and collaborative work, the road to improvement was long, bumpy, and full of potholes.

¹⁷ Crucial to the way Communities of Practice are understood and believed to operate, here, concerns the way leadership is interpreted and enacted: leadership in collaborative settings is different than the traditional hierarchical-positional view and that leadership emerges in CoPs. Leadership tends to be facilitative, shared, informal, democratic and egalitarian. See: Huxam and Vangan (2000) for an excellent treatment of these aspects and interpretations; Kirk and Shutte (2004) for a relevant and helpful discussion of the tension between informal, shared leadership alongside traditional, hierarchical leadership; and Raelin (2006) for an insightful discussion of collaborative leadership, including distinctions amongst compassionate, concurrent, collective, and mutual leadership.

challenging assumptions, going against popular opinion, stepping outside the limitations of one's job title and pay grade, and doing things "under the radar."¹⁸

In short, leadership rests in a person, at least as much as a title or role; individuals and groups can achieve much more than often thought possible without dependence on external superiors; and groups can find and / or develop within themselves the skills and abilities to lead themselves effectively. There is ample evidence to support the assumption that imposed formalisation, direction, and control stymie creativity, initiative, and responsiveness (Collier and Esteban, 1999; Weymes, 2004; Wynder, 2007). It may be the departure from the norm and the associated ambiguity and possible chaos this may cause for people that creates the environment where members of Communities of Practice can grow and develop. Seeing opportunities and working collaboratively to realise them, and incorporating the lessons from experience, builds capable community members and attains much that might otherwise be impossible.

A Glance into the Relevant Literature

Much has been written about Communities of Practice in the past decade and one-half; and, as a recent and on-going review of the literature clearly demonstrates, Communities of Practice are on the rise, as is practitioner and academic interest in them. Of particular relevance to *Practicing Community*, there has been surprisingly little found in the category Need for or Provision of Community or Meaning, with Groen and Kawalilak (2006) being a notable exception and speaking to both of these areas, and a corollary dearth of research published on Identity, Belonging, and Spirit of Community. It may be that the arguments for such dimensions of group and organisational life are to be found elsewhere.

More optimistic is the encouraging amount of research coming out on collaboration. Included amongst this group are: Allee and Taug (2006); Austin and Duncan-Hewitt (2005); Garavan, Carbery, and Murphy (2007); Huxam and Vangan (2000); Tarmizi, de Vreede, and Zigurs (2007); and Zorfass and Keefe Rivero (2005).

Much is coming out on leadership and leadership development with respect to CoPs, including: Kirk and Shutte (2004), Muller (2006), and Oliver and Kandadi (2006); a range of papers on distributed or shared leadership (Bligh, Pearce, and Kohles, 2006; Collier and Esteban, 1999; MacBeath, 2006; McCrimmon, 2005; and Raelin, 2006; and at least one on emergent leadership (Huxam and Vangan, 2000).

A number of researchers have published works concerning sociological aspects of Communities of Practice, power, and group dynamics; some of which include: Bligh, Pearce, and Kohles (2006); Lesham (2007); Muller (2006); Pastoors (2007); Pemberton, Mavin, and Stalker (2007); Smith (2005); Thompson (2005); and Veenswijk and Chisalita (2007).

There has been very little work done on CoP Life Cycles / Developmental Stages. Wisker, Robinson, and Shacham (2007) touch on the subject, and Hays (2008a) puts forward an advanced depiction of CoP developmental stages with respect to the external leadership / facilitation appropriate for groups. There has been very little work done on CoP roles or role theory, or the kinds of people that populate and thrive within them, Pavlin (2006) being an exception. In terms of empowerment and agency,¹⁹ Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, and Clark (2006), Popay, et al, (2004), and Veenswijk and Chisalita (2007) have contributed.

Also coming as a surprise is the very little published on Corporate Benefits and Outcomes. It seems limits and downsides are of more interest, with authors such as Pastoors (2007) and Pemberton, Mavin, and Stalker (2007) providing contrast to the overwhelmingly favourable (if general) portrayals of CoPs and their advantages. Perhaps less obvious, but just as important, there seems to be little concrete and specific published with respect to Individual Benefits and Outcomes / Personal and Professional Development.

These neglected areas in the research are offset by the many considerations of CoPs and organisational learning, some of which include: Brown and Duguid (1991); Huzzard (2004); Snell (2001); Easterby-Smith, Snell, and Gherardi (1998); Peile and Briner (2001); Spender and Grinyer (1996); Garavan, Carbery, and Murphy (2007); and Pemberton, Mavin, and Stalker (2007).

At the same time, there has been a recent, but substantial interest in Communities of Practice as instruments of Organisational Development and Change, as exemplified by: Allee and Taug (2006); Fetterman (2002); Gadman and

¹⁸ "Under the radar"... a term the author had not heard before (that is, before the "reality" TV show *Big Brother* popularised the expression). It seems to have leaked into our usage and is consistent with the idea of subversiveness. See MacBeath (2006) for an extraordinary article on leader as subversive agent.

¹⁹ Agency—personal and collective—is a crucial aspect of Community of Practice effectiveness. It is one of the things that make a community a viable one. Agency involves acknowledgement of ones efficacy and obligation to contribute; and greater appreciation of ones personal power and influence, and skill in their use. It is about being present: awareness and presence—knowing when and how you impact others. By "presence" here is meant the sense of agency, not just active or engaged, but engaging; presence, not in sense of charisma or allure, but in terms of taking an active, responsible role—putting yourself "out there." Role plays, debriefs, real case studies, and other activities complemented by reflection contribute to individuals' growing sense of agency.

Cooper (2005); Huzzard (2004); Iedema, Meyerkort, and White (2005); Popay, Mallinson, and Kowarzik (2004); Smith (2005); Ward (2000); and Zorfass and Keefe Rivero (2005).

Finally, there seems to be a particular interest in self-direction, emergent phenomena, complex systems dynamics, and chaos theory, as suggested by studies such as: Collier and Esteban (1999), Juriado and Gustafsson (2007), Lichtenstein (2000), Smith (2005), and Tywoniak (2007). While *Practicing Community* does not dwell on these phenomena, much of what was observed in the Communities of Practice can be described as emergent and self-organising.

As the preceding suggests, many aspects of CoPs have been investigated and written about. They have been scrutinised through various lenses, with multiple theoretical frames applied. The range of treatments – sociological, anthropological, learning / developmental, and systemic / chaotic, just to name a few – is surprising, interesting, usually complementary, and all relevant. While abundant and continuing to amass, the literature on Communities of Practice remains fragmentary, the subject being too big to entertain as a whole and the facets many. Some papers are highly theoretical and abstract; others fairly simplistic; but with a solid selection of papers that are thought-provoking, insightful, and starting points for those seeking to implement or better understand Communities of Practice.

Not to dismiss notable exceptions, the preponderance of articles coming out on Communities of Practice comes from management and organisational circles, and, even then, from the Knowledge Management and Organisational Learning proponents. As might be expected, there has been a consistent flow of papers from the workplace learning / professional development community—although smaller than one might expect. There is an increasing number of articles published by the Higher Education community. Few CoP articles have been co-authored by practitioners and faculty members (Milne and Callahan, 2006, providing one exception). As both a full-time faculty member at a research-intensive university and a practicing management consultant, the author is familiar with the business of education and the management of business, including its learning and development requirements. Having worked in and with Communities of Practice in both sectors, this paper may bridge a perceived divide between academia and industry.

While the principles and practices of Communities of Practice in academia and business may appear alike, there may be some very real differences between them with implications for establishing and sustaining CoPs in the respective sectors. This is considered further in Concluding Remarks. There have been, unfortunately, far too few papers concerning CoPs and community development and other “grass roots” initiatives (the paper on public health by Popay, et al, 2004 an exception). Where it might be reasonable to assume CoPs in business and academia are substantially different, it is probably the case that CoPs in academia and community development (and in *not for profit* organisations more generally) are more alike. These “hypotheses” should be investigated in subsequent studies.

Many of the 100-some papers included as references to this paper have something of value to add to an understanding of Communities of Practice, where they exist, how and why they thrive (or fail), and what they contribute to members and their organisations. While there are a few papers that speak to the limits and downsides of CoPs, the author has unearthed no paper that covers the investment cost, tangible or otherwise. Given that interest in CoPs is likely to continue for some time, determining the real cost as well as the real benefits of Communities of Practice is important for the writing of justifiable business cases and should be the focus of further research.

Of all the articles reviewed for this paper, the following deserve recognition, each for different reasons, as indicated:

Collier and Esteban (1999)	Concerns governance in participative organisations, along with issues of freedom, creativity, and ethics. Incorporates stewardship and dynamic systems theory.
Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2005)	Good detail on establishing CoPs.
Elkjaer (2004)	Interesting distinction between systemic and transactional paradigms. Good coverage on Dewey, reflective thinking, reflection and learning.
Green (2005)	Interesting paper covering trust and [shared] reflection. The use of vignettes is quite like the approach taken in this paper.
Gunawardena, Ortegano Layne, Carabajal, and Frechette (2006)	Deals with several topics of relevance to this paper, as well as other areas in which the author is particularly interested, including mentoring, wisdom, and transformational learning.
Garavan, Carbery, and Murphy (2007)	Good coverage and fit for current paper, especially concerning leadership.
Gherardi, Nicolini, and Odella (1998)	Excellent source of background on CoPs, particularly the social learning aspects. Rich case.
Gongla and Rizzuto (2001)	Big, polished paper. Full of detail on a vast assembly of CoPs. Presents CoP life cycles.
Jacobs and Coghlan (2005)	Like the [group dynamics] focus on listening. Covers much of interest and relevance: communication theory, identity formation, social learning theory, meaning-making.
Jorgensen and Hagelskjaer Lauridsen (2005)	Makes a cogent case for cross-functional and interdisciplinary CoPs. Stresses importance of reflection and reflective practice.

Liedtka (1999)	Great paper. Speaks of the “good community” and the value in merging the ideas of community and business. Also addresses participative leadership and collaboration.
Snell (2001)	Unique paper examining philosophical dimensions of the learning organisation, what he calls “moral foundations.” Thought provoking. Extensively documented.
Tarmizi, de Vreede, and Zigurs (2007)	Important paper. Shows depth in characterising leadership and facilitation.
Muller (2006)	Strong paper on leadership in CoPs. Concerns group dynamics, as well.
Popay, Mallinson, and, Kowarwik (2004)	CoPs as useful in achieving stakeholder buy-in and change. Entertains the notion of agency. Better than most on group dynamics.
Hara and Schwen (2006)	Great overview and interpretation of CoPs. Good case study grounded in theory.

CoPs under the Radar

This section presents Community of Practice behaviour in a range of circumstances. The situations – or vignettes – have been chosen because of their illustrative power to reveal a particular type of situation, interaction, or behaviour, each characteristic of a more general behavioural tendency observed in one or more CoP. While the vignettes present only a snapshot in time, they reveal considerable complexity about the way CoPs operate and the measure of difficulty with which they must contend. Since Communities of Practice are not one moment in time but an on-going process, a final narrative attempts to give a sense of the moving picture, that is, evolution over time.

Vignette One

The group comprising faculty members from a range of disciplines takes their seats, convened for no other reason than to entertain the subject of academic leadership and to experience Community of Practice. There is a little talk, but generally people look to the facilitator expectantly. The experienced CoP facilitator offers a preamble stating that she is there only to kick the discussion off, and that participants will be determining their own objectives and agenda, and managing their own process. She will become a participant, with others taking on the facilitator role or the group as a whole figuring out alternative ways of managing the process. In turn, each participant says something about what he or she would like to achieve during the session. A few people have much to say, a couple very little. One fellow speaks about a particular leadership issue in his department in some detail. After the round robin, when the facilitator suggests a couple of options for proceeding, one guy suggests they consider the fellow’s leadership case, as “it is something they can all relate to.” The suggestion is seconded. More about the situation is explained by its originator. When finished speaking, there are a few questions directed to the speaker and a couple of tentative solutions. By this time, attention is focused on the speaker and / or the problem.

Vignette Two

An on-going Community of Practice is in one of its bi-weekly meetings moving productively through its agenda, which was sent out prior to the meeting. As has grown to be convention, the individual preparing the agenda is also facilitating the meeting. It has almost always been the same woman. The senior person in the group welcomes the initiative and administrative responsibility this individual takes on, appreciating her contribution to keeping the CoP moving forward. A main focus of the day is the planning of a large upcoming conference on Communities of Practice. Differences of opinion are aired and discussed, and compromises and satisfactory decisions are made consensually. While sometimes laborious, the group works through a balance of both high-level and detail. People generally speak in turn, listen well, and show respect for one another’s points of view. At one point in the meeting someone suggests that the conference be “kicked off” by the university vice chancellor. Another group member responds by saying this would be antithetical to the message they are trying to communicate, and explains her position—that they can and should demonstrate their own agency and ownership for the conference. Important and interesting discussion ensues until the senior person present states that he is going to kick off the session. Discussion ends and the meeting is subdued until finishing shortly after.

Vignette Three

The learning and teaching group had been meeting once or twice a month for several months. Initially attracting about 40 faculty members from various disciplines in the large, diverse school, attendance was averaging around 20. Following on the heels of a university movement to create learning communities, the Head of School had been quite encouraging of the initiative. She asserted that whether or not and how the learning and teaching group progressed was up to the group. She came to some meetings, and endeavoured to be a participant in lieu of taking a leadership role. People seemed to want her to be more active, though, sharing her vision and directing the course of action. Participants frequently looked to her for agreement or decision. While people showed plenty of initiative, there was also a tendency to defer to the Head of School. It was obvious during meetings that some individuals were happy just to talk about teaching and learning; many, however, thought that only a concrete set of objectives and activities would justify their purpose and focus their work. On the whole, the same five or six persons did the most talking. A lot of time was spent trying to come up with a common platform, but the group seemed to go round and round without ever

coming up with an agreed-upon focus. The group fell apart all too easily when disrupted by the university reorganisation going on around it.

Vignette Four

Convened a year or so ago, the group has been meeting every two weeks on average. It is comprised of a core of five. Most attend regularly, most of the time. A few others come when they can. Members come from a range of faculties and departments, and they appear to have a complementary set of knowledge, skills, and perspectives. Their common objective is to enhance the experience of casual (part-time) faculty, most of whom are relatively new to teaching and many whose only venture onto the campus is to teach one or two courses or tutorials. So, the loose charter was to improve community for casuals and to better support them in their teaching. In the year the CoP has been together, huge progress has been made on a number of fronts. In short, the university community as a whole has a much greater consciousness about casual teachers and their needs, and a range of initiatives to better induct and support them are underway. Interestingly, this group has always been very self-directing. The original members who were the more senior withdrew from participation early on, presumably trusting the core team to proceed with little direction. As a consequence, the core team members identified initiatives they believed necessary, set priorities amongst them, and managed to their own agenda. Early on, the group settled on an intranet solution as a first and key strategy, and considerable time had been invested in making this work.

Vignette Five

The post-graduate class has really become a community. Students-members don't use the term Community of Practice or CoP, but see and describe themselves as a super team. They have increasingly spoken openly about the rapport they have with one another. Small groups and the class as a whole meet outside class time to socialise and to drive their project forward. What pulled them together was their mandate: achieve something lasting at the university to improve community and the overall learning experience. To do this they had to conduct a community needs analysis, propose and agree upon one or more recommendations, develop a project plan, present the proposal to the university executive, implement, and evaluate their project(s); all with reference to the theory and practice of management and organisation. Since the project was first and foremost about community, it was important that they thought through carefully how they would work together and with university stakeholders. Some students expressed frustration while others suffered in silence at the lack of direction and structure imposed by the course convenor. Over time, five students emerged as class leaders, something they and other class members recognised. Their shared leadership enabled the class to achieve its goal, about which all classmates felt proud. As they struggled to achieve something meaningful within the limits of one semester, they learnt a lot more than just textbook theory or even project and management skills. They learnt about themselves and about each other. They developed all sorts of collaborative skills, and their views of leadership and themselves and others as leaders were changed forever. All agreed that the requirement for reflective journal-writing and shared reflections in class each week significantly contributed to their individual learning and their effectiveness as a group.

Vignette Six

This Community of Practice formed 18 months ago. All of the members of this CoP are or were on other CoPs as well, making this group unique in that regard. Some members had more experience in or with Communities of Practice, others less so. The purpose of this group was, initially, to serve as a kind of support group for members of other CoPs, especially those who were designated or emerging leaders. The shared decision made to convene the group was a natural outcome of intense on-going work with a variety of Communities of Practice, each struggling in its own way. It was thought that effective functioning of CoPs could be promoted by focusing attention on those already suited to or endeavouring to lead. It was thought that the group could learn together and use each other as resources, kind of like an Action Learning set (see Raelin, 1997 and 2006, for further detail on Action Learning). Early days were characterised by a lot of chaos and confusion. Most people seemed to be looking for direction, clarity of purpose and role, or a "quick fix." As of late, the group has settled. Members feel a part of a community.

These days, the group continues to meet on the order of every two weeks. Even though the group has been meeting for well over a year, there always seems to be something interesting to do or to talk about. The group achieved a major success together last year, which was a bonding experience, as well as a defining moment in the CoP's development. The event they designed and ran as a group built skills, confidence, and interdependence. There were other bonding experiences, large and small, each one contributing to increasing trust, mutual respect and admiration—a deepening of community. Since all participants were active members of other CoPs or endeavouring to get new communities up and running, they shared common struggles and could relate to one another's experiences. These experiences gave purpose and focus to sessions. There has been a continual, though very soft push by a small minority to keep the CoP going and growing, something all members realise and appreciate. But, it is time to reinvent the group, dedicate to new purposes, and commit to a greater sharing of the drive and the administrative tasks necessary to keep a Community of Practice alive. As the more active participants back off, others are taking up the mantle. Just this week an e-mail arrived from one of the members suggesting the agenda for the next meeting and volunteering to facilitate it.

Discussion and Analysis

The preceding vignettes show diverse Communities of Practice at various points in their development. And, while it may not be clear from the limited detail provided, each CoP was both unique and quite similar in some respects to the others. Following is, first, an interpretive synopsis of each vignette, and, then, a more thorough discussion of the vignettes and their implications.

<p>Vignette 1. Early days. Characterised by “jumping to task.” This is often a problem in new groups and teams, reflecting a drive to achieve / perform in the short-term (a <i>task</i> focus), as opposed to investing in more meaningful (if difficult) developmental work, dialogue, or complex problem solving (a <i>process</i> focus). Shows emergent leadership, and the leader as one of the more active, involved participants. Suggestive concerning facilitation style and its effects. Indicative of the “problem” of experiencing lack of clear objective and structure.</p>	<p>Vignette 4. Highly-functioning, established CoP. Shows emergent practice habits and [persistent] roles. Success can be attributed to presence of a compelling purpose and clearly-defined objective (task), and complementary / sufficient skills. Raises issues with respect to autonomy and self-governance at potential odds with the larger organisation. The CoP’s “big picture” view may be dubious. Concerns leadership [abdication?]. This CoP is likely to disband when the task is completed, unless it takes upon itself other tasks aligned with its purpose or generates an entirely new purpose for itself.</p>
<p>Vignette 2. Established CoP with norms and process. Says something about group dynamics and group problem-solving and collaborative behaviour. Highlights a discontinuity between shared leadership and positional leadership, and how a simple leadership act can change the dynamic of a work group. Also reflects tendency of initiators and organisers to remain central, reinforced by members more than happy to let others manage and administer.</p>	<p>Vignette 5. Clearly shows power of shared mandate in contributing to feelings of ownership. A link between leader (teacher) style and leadership emergence amongst group members is suggested. Demonstrates leader (leadership) emergence or assertion when (a) allowed and (b) called upon. Common purpose and compelling vision substituted for lack of firm structure, clear direction and guidance. Value of reflection and reflective practice is acknowledged. Short to medium time frame.</p>
<p>Vignette 3. 40 participants – or even 20 – are probably too many to function effectively as a CoP, although okay for a Community of Interest. There is a question concerning [shared] purpose. The leader appears ready to step aside and allow others to take some responsibility and control. Group dynamics concern a search for direction and leadership; deference to positional leader; empowerment and ownership. Problems have to do with ambiguity: group members don’t know what to do with their degrees of freedom.</p>	<p>Vignette 6. Length of time permits view of the CoP as an on-going process. Early days marked by ambiguity and confusion; giving way, over time, to stability, increasing commitment, and productivity. On-going real work and bonding experiences appear to contribute to deepening sense of community. Continuous support may be a contributing factor in sustainability. Shows sophisticated degree of self-direction and evolving purpose. The fact that the CoP consists of leaders already may account for its level of maturity and effectiveness.</p>

Table 2. Brief Synopsis of Vignettes.

Several dominant themes, and a couple of lesser ones, arise from cursory review of the vignettes. Those themes, discussed below, include:

- purpose
- task-focus
- group dynamics
- habitual patterns
- practice
- leadership
- collaboration
- empowerment
- roles
- community
- evolution
- reflection and reflective practice
- initiative / self-direction
- emergent phenomena
- tools and process

Inherent Themes

While these themes are distinctive and can be described separately, they are also closely related and worked in concert in the CoPs observed. They are probably more *interdependent* than independent. For example, leadership and evolution are directly related to one another, though not in the one to one correspondence one might expect. There is no implied order to the themes sequenced below.

Purpose. Purpose appears to be a crucial aspect of Communities of Practice. The particular purpose may not matter too much, as long as a critical mass of members understand and accept it. All groups vacillated until they came to agreement on purpose. It is unclear whether or not an emergent purpose is more compelling than a designated one, but experience suggests that purpose and vision generated by a group is better understood and earns greater commitment than one imposed. In terms of the CoPs represented above, purposes ranged from clear and concrete, task-like to deeper, more diffuse ones. One would assume that clear, agreed-upon purpose provides continuity and a reference point for measuring progress and achievement. Finally, implications include:

1. The fact that groups might jump too quickly to purpose (see task-focus, below). On the one hand, this may restrict their very potential. Their deceptively effective working behaviour may be counter-productive in the long run, having disregarded important group development work, or distracted the group from more important tasks or meaningful work.²⁰
2. All the above said, the alignment of purpose or purposes on which a CoP settles to organisational priorities must be considered, and alignment or contention and its implications factored. Highly-aligned purposes may produce harmony; while substantial change may call for competing or contradictory purposes.

Evolution. All CoPs had an evolutionary trajectory irrespective of how long they were together. Consistent with much team and group theory, they each progressed through developmental stages (see Hays, 2008a). In this case, an underlying goal was to build community, so achievement of attributes of community complement other indicators of CoP development (effectiveness). This applies even to groups convened for 90 minutes to experience Communities of Practice at a Knowledge Management conference. One measure of CoP functioning (developmental stage) was the level of reflection and reflective practice (see below). Since there were no imposed or external standards for measuring CoP performance (though CoPs generated an assessment device for developmental purposes), the Communities of Practice were self-referencing: reflection and critique centred on task achievement as well as on process.²¹ Of relevance to these groups was the increasing appreciation of the CoP as a community.

Evolution is tied inextricably to leadership (see next item). CoP evolution requires or exhibits a paradox, a tension between leadership provided (externally) and leadership asserted within the CoP. The ambiguity, “wandering,” and frustration experienced by most of the Communities of Practice in the vignettes in the early days could be offset by clearer structure and more direct leadership, the price of which is dependency on that provided, replication of the typical organisation and hierarchy, and perpetuation of the status quo. The CoP must find its own way, and way may be twisted, obscured, and full of pitfalls. The CoP that can navigate these hurdles and learn from the experience is set for greater achievements. Some CoPs may be fatally challenged by these circumstances. Striking the leadership balance and providing the right kind of leadership relative to the CoP’s developmental stage (Hays, 2008a) remains a difficult task and one worthy of considerable thought.

The more mature, sophisticated CoP will possess and demonstrate a wide range of competencies, including its own leadership and self-directive capacity. It is probably the case that a given Community of Practice will have within it the skills and abilities to achieve its tasks and fulfil its community needs. It merely needs to discover them. Support along the way may be needed, but imposed management and leadership are counterproductive in the long run.

Leadership. Leadership was an issue in all Communities of Practice observed. Most if not all CoPs began their lives with a period of ambiguity and confusion, some marked by frustration and dismay. This period was most characterised by a search for direction, purpose, and structure. Some of the CoPs were “a solution looking for a problem.” Most were looking for a leadership that was not directly and immediately provided, at least not in the form people were accustomed to. This period resolved through the emergence of leadership from within members of the fledgling CoPs and / or from getting used to the kind of leadership exhibited by facilitators, or both. It is important to note that external facilitators were provided in most cases. There are many individual, group, and organisational implications. Without going into detail, and with each implication worthy of further investigation, these include:

1. Issues of parallel leadership and structures: the autonomous, self-governing CoP within a traditional, hierarchical structure, and all the tensions and dynamics associated with this.
2. The empowered workforce: few individuals – even highly-professional types – are ready, willing, and able to assert their own leadership; and when they do, persistent patterns of interaction might undermine their efforts.
3. Developing leaders and leadership: how do you prepare people for leadership when existing structures might not allow for the expression or experience of leadership by non-positional leaders?
4. Organisational readiness: are the organisation and its leaders willing and able to “let go;” that is, to truly permit and support Communities of Practice whose efforts might threaten the status quo?
5. True shared, distributed leadership (Goldstein, 2004; McCrimmon, 2005; Spillane, 2005) may be more rhetoric than reality. And, even with genuine intent, given the above, what does it mean for a particular organisation or group, and how do you achieve it?
6. In groups, how do the most effective leaders arise (as opposed to the most vocal and confident)?

²⁰ “Jumping to task” is a defining feature of new teams, groups, and CoPs. Preoccupation with task over process is indicative of groups on the lower end of the maturity / sophistication continuum (see Hays, 2008b). If this tendency prevails, the group is likely to fracture or require strong [external] leadership if sufficiently challenged. Inattention to group process will limit the CoP’s capacity to move along the continuum toward more effective and self-directed behaviour.

²¹ Peter Vaill (2000) uses the term self-referencing much in the way intended here in his sensitive remarks concerning Introduction to Spirituality for Business Leadership.

7. Different types of work groups require different types of leadership. How flexible are leaders in moving across types of groups? What is the desirable type of leadership for Communities of Practice? Do even different CoPs require different types of leaders, and, if so, how can you tell what types of leadership is most needed?
8. Finally, what are the long-term consequences of moving further down the path of empowered Communities of Practice? This is a question that transcends organisational boundaries.

Practicing Community has taken the position that Communities of Practice can and should become self-directing. They are not work groups or project teams that rely on traditional team leadership. In fact, they provide alternatives to these traditional forms in the workplace, and work best when command and control methods are ineffective or inappropriate, such as in community-based and volunteer organisations, or amongst highly-skilled professionals, or even in teaching leadership for the collaborative, empowered, networked world of the 21st Century. This view is founded on the philosophy and principles of shared / distributed leadership (Bligh, Pearce, and Kohles, 2006; Collier and Esteban, 1999; Huxam and Vangan, 2000; MacBeath, 2006; McCrimmon, 2005; Raelin, 2006; Spillane, 2005). For a very good alternative portrayal of CoP leadership, please see Garavan, Carbery, and Murphy (2007).

Task-focus. All groups started out with a specific task or came to one quickly. They floundered until they had one. Experience suggests that groups find it difficult to coalesce without a shared purpose or some other common and continuing bond to unite them. This purpose was often served in the Communities of Practice by one or more specific and concrete things the group could accomplish. This may be particularly the case for professionals whose lives are already busy and who may be driven by incentives and rewards CoP participation does not offer. Few individuals saw real value, initially, in intangibles such as *community* or vague goals such as learning about leadership or developing practice. But give them a specific task, and they were all in! Given the dangers of “jumping to task” but acknowledging that groups and teams tend to mobilise for task achievement, a first task in setting up CoPs might be to have them work through a problem-solving process. Debriefing the process can be a second, related activity that introduces them to the value of reflection. Combined, these activities have been shown to build community substantively.²²

The problem with a task focus, as intimated above, is that once the task is completed there may be nothing left for the group [to work on]. There is nothing wrong with a task focus or task accomplishment.²³ That is why you have a team or a task force. But that is different than a Community of Practice. In a CoP, there is always a reason for being: practice can always be improved; community can always be served. How tasks are achieved is more the focus of a CoP than the tasks themselves. A CoP is not just about doing a job. It is about feeling part of something bigger. This has considerable implications for organisations, and may explain why CoPs succeed and fail. What jobs have they been given? What jobs should they be given? What needs and motivations do the members bring to the community? These findings and implications are consistent with the work on importance of community and meaning by Groen and Kawalilak (2006) and others.

Collaboration. As inferred here, collaboration and practice are closely allied. In fact, although possibly imprecise, collaboration and practice were used interchangeably in parlance. And, apart from the affective components of community, collaboration and community were also synonymous, perhaps because CoP members saw themselves as more of a community of diverse individuals working together than a group of practitioners drawn from common disciplines to address practice. Again, this may be just a fine distinction, but a relevant one. Various individuals affiliated with the Communities of Practice toyed with linking “C” concepts such as Community, Culture, Collegiality, Communication, Collaboration, and Change.

In any event, CoPs were about collaboration: working and learning together to achieve shared goals. CoPs will not succeed without effective collaboration. Collaboration does not come naturally to everyone, and not all possess collaborative skills. The good news is that skills and habits of collaboration can be learnt, and CoP members will learn them over time and become more effective *if they remain intact*, and if they make a concerted effort to develop as individuals and as a formidable work group. Regular debriefs and reflection sessions assured that everyone remained attentive to productive group behaviour and processes used to solve problems, make decisions, plan, implement, and even evaluate strategies.

One CoP even developed a Community of Practice process facilitation inventory to document collaborative and facilitative skills members needed to have and to provide a means of assessing them. The process of developing such an inventory already served to increase participants’ awareness of process skills and provided focus for dialogue concerning individual and group behaviour and its consequences. This also led to considerations of a Community of Practice curriculum: what CoP members and facilitators needed to know and do, and how to develop associated skills and abilities.

²² Variations of this process have been used successfully across a range of CoPs and groups in workshops, seminars, team-building exercises, and project “kick-offs.” See Hays, 2004, for an overview of group problem solving and operationalising processes.

²³ There is also nothing wrong with disbanding once purpose has been achieved. This is a legitimate and, perhaps, inevitable part of the natural life cycle of a Community of Practice. Members will remain as long as their needs are being met

Reflection and Reflective Practice. The evidence that reflection and reflective practice play important roles in individual and group development and in the building of community is convincing. Two research articles of particular relevance to this paper are Green (2005) who explored trust and shared reflection, and Jørgensen and Hagelskjaer Lauridsen (2005) who considered reflection and reflective practice amongst cross-functional and interdisciplinary Communities of Practice. Just as certain is that reflection and reflective practice will be neglected and discounted in the early days of group life. With persistence and effective facilitation, participants will, over time, come to see the value in reflective practice. Both the good and the bad news is that reflection depends on and builds a trusting and respectful environment. Such caring and forgiving climates characterise community. Unfortunately, such climates are not common, and may need to be slowly built. It may be that reflective practice and *practicing community* go hand in hand.²⁴

As reflection and reflective practice contribute to personal development and wisdom (see, for example, Hays 2007), it also contributes to and is a hallmark of the more mature, sophisticated Community of Practice. Here, participants share their personal reflections with one another, and the group as a whole reflects on its behaviour, performance, and effectiveness, including what it is learning and how.

Group Dynamics. As a general category, there is no more consistent and pervasive aspect to Communities of Practice than group dynamics. Paradoxically, there is little in the CoP literature focussing on group dynamics, with Muller (2006) as a notable exception, and Jacobs and Coghlan (2005) and Popay, Mallinson, and Kowarwik (2004) each sensitively illuminating the complex world of group dynamics. The literature on CoPs tends to emphasise such things as collaborative tools and work processes and organisational support systems and structures, rather than the interactive behaviour, perhaps because it is more difficult to observe and assess.²⁵ By nature, both community and practice are first and foremost about people and how they relate to and interact with one another. What participants in these CoPs found—and what confronts and frustrates many trying to fathom Communities of Practice—is that it is the social rules of engagement and individuals' capabilities to perform in group work situations that predict a CoP's success and sustainability. All other factors – relevant and necessary as they are – cannot make an effectively-functioning Community of Practice out of individuals who neither want to be there nor possess the “team skills” and social finesse to contribute to and derive from the group, both necessary conditions for sustainability. Unfortunately, recognising that people and group skills are key is of little value because most people think they have and apply them or that they are easily learnt.

The dynamics of the CoPs observed were interesting in their level of intensity. Often, working in and with a CoP was an emotional roller-coaster ride. There were angry outbursts; there were insinuations and accusations; there were tears. There was seething resentment, scorched feelings, and maybe professional rivalries. There were physical and emotional withdrawals. At the same time, there were laughter, joy, pride, friendship, and all kinds of “sentimental journeys.” It's just a supposition, but Communities of Practice may have to exhibit and contend with emotions and what prompts them to make it in the long run. Maybe that's what makes them communities. While not all CoPs succeeded, those that did dealt openly and actively with group dynamics, mostly by reflecting on situations and considering alternatives.

Size. While size was clearly a factor in one CoP, and is known to impact on group dynamics, size was not an appreciative issue for the other CoPs, with membership and attendance ranging from five to fifteen. Size could reasonably be expected to be a more significant factor when issues such as productivity, efficiency, or coordination are paramount. Size in concert with diversity would also be an appreciative issue. In the CoPs discussed here, it was common to break down into sub-groups of three to five when problem solving or discussing topics in detail. This gave everyone a chance to talk and to become more intimately acquainted with all members of or visitors to the CoP.

Tools and Processes. As with size, tools and processes were not a dominant theme and only later became recognised as potentially very important. Perhaps because the CoPs in question had no particular or standard tools and processes it was not obvious how crucial they are to effective operation. In fact, efforts to institute intranet communication channels with “collaboration spaces” failed. While many may disagree, virtual communities are not the same as those meeting physically in real time. They are harder to build and provide less of the personality and social aspects of community. (Of course, they offer advantages, and it is accepted that some people actually prefer to meet and work virtually.) That said, every group must have some means of communicating and more or less routine or standard ways of working. This spans everything from how meetings are run to how decisions are made, and includes how tasks are distributed and monitored. Members must be willing and able to use agreed-upon tools and processes, and breakdowns will occur if they do not.

²⁴ In discussing this point with colleagues, consensus was reached that reflection is seldom done as it requires one to be aware of oneself—feelings, thoughts, behaviour—and the consequences of this on oneself and ones work mates. There was disagreement as to the level of reflection and self-awareness of which many people are capable or exhibit, but most remain pessimistic. Shared (group) reflection and awareness are even less likely.

²⁵ A good paper examining the group dynamics with respect to strategic thinking, and other topics of relevance to this paper, is Bonn (2005).

Empowerment. Empowerment is a dominant theme going hand in hand with other elements. It may be difficult to disentangle empowerment from leadership, for example, or from group dynamics. It is within community that people “find their voice.” It is through commitment to purpose that individuals and groups find focus and support to do things they might not otherwise have attempted. This isn’t enough, however. Empowerment is founded at least as much on capability (knowledge, skill, resourcefulness) and confidence gained through experience as it is on some granting of authority and access to opportunity. This comprises the bundle termed enablement. Communities of Practice are mechanisms of enablement. At first, few members will *feel* empowered. They may like the words, but doubt the process, themselves, and / or their organisation. If their first tentative steps are encouraging, they are on their way to becoming empowered and effective. These complicated and tangled issues are clarified in works by Handley et al (2006), Popay et al (2004), and Veenswijk and Chisalita (2007).

Subject CoPs underwent a great deal of personal and professional development.²⁶ Much can be achieved in a year or more, almost without awareness. It is probably less the topic that matters, but how it is handled. For CoPs, the proven-effective strategies are more than interactive. They teach themselves; they produce their own materials; they build on their own experiences. In so doing, they prove their competence to themselves and each other while developing it. They are, in fact, empowering themselves. All that said, none of this happens of its own accord. Groups have to begin somewhere and have a reason for coming together. *Someone* or *something* has to start the ball rolling. And, this all has a cost, as discussed above in the section on evolution.

Initiative and Self-Direction. Initiative and self-direction may technically be different, but have been lumped together, here, to imply a prevailing tendency in the Communities of Practice observed to *initiate* new and different projects and activities with little to no external prompting and to effectively *manage and coordinate* them on their own. This shows a range of interesting and important behaviours, including creativity and responsiveness, on the one hand, and the ability to carry tasks through to completion, on the other. This also implies the ability to recognise when a task or its implementation strategy needs to be altered. In the CoPs with which the author worked, initiative and self-direction increased over time. Once people come to accept that they really do have the power to do things on their own, they begin to do so.²⁷ Of course, it’s a little more complicated than merely accepting one’s personal or a group’s power. Initiative and self-direction both rely on skill, confidence, trust in colleagues, some amount of vision, and other qualities. But these were all seen to develop over the course of a year or less. This suggests that CoPs can be generators of important organisational skills and attitudes. They may need a “kick start,” and this can be provided by facilitators who can shift their behaviour over time (let go) in accordance with the group’s developmental stage (Hays, 2008a; see also Gongla and Rizzuto, 2001 and Dubé, et al, 2005 for insights into CoP developmental stages).

Habitual Patterns. It may be an axiom about human behaviour that we tend to settle into routines and habitual patterns, but nowhere is this more obvious or telling than in CoPs, teams, and other work groups that remain together for an appreciable period.²⁸ Habitual patterns may be a subset of group dynamics, but they also apply to the environment and organisation surrounding the group. The interdependence set up between the work group and its surrounds may reinforce internal behaviour, and make it both more complex and less obvious. This implies two potential difficulties: (1) internal behaviour would be more resistant to change and (2) the work group may find itself impotent in changing the external environment. In an example from the Communities of Practice considered here, the groups incorporated beliefs about the surrounding system that influenced their decisions and activities. Despite burgeoning feelings of efficacy, so strong was the belief that “you have to be a full professor to get anything done here” that initiatives were put on hold or altered until a sponsor could be enlisted. Any semblance of behaviour in the surrounds perceived as representative of this belief understandably reinforced it. The occasional deference to authority provides another example of habitual patterns and their effects, contravening professed egalitarian, democratic ideals of the CoPs. In group development, habitual patterns need to be identified, their implications understood, and patterns changed where appropriate. Here, honest reflective practice is essential.

Roles. Along with habitual patterns, roles can come to have a persistent and predictable pattern. In the Communities of Practice observed and described briefly in the vignettes, people “fell” almost automatically into certain roles, according to their predilections and experience and skills. Meeting facilitation and logistical-administrative support provide two obvious examples, but there were also other more subtle roles, including comedian, confidant, counsellor, mediator, mentor, note-taker / scribe, process observer, question poser, and sounding-board. Since there was some overlap in members across CoPs, the tendency to replicate roles was even more the case, with certain individuals “drawn” into roles by those who knew them and had worked with them previously or were on other communities with them.

²⁶ A Community of Practice “curriculum” was developed by and for CoPs and their members, description of which exceeds the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that with careful thought and productive brainstorming a wide range of useful topics and skills can be identified. It could easily require one year to progress through the bulk of topics and skills identified as relevant to CoPs.

²⁷ This may be a crucial mental process involving a paradigm shift or a threshold event, as explored in “Threshold and Transformation” (Hays, 2008b).

²⁸ See the following for more detail on routines and their effects: Lorenz (2001), Murray (2003), and Murray and Donegan (2003).

Whilst many illustrations undoubtedly exist, an example of a role problem from Vignette 2 is suggested by the senior individual declaring that he would kick off the session in the upcoming symposium. Problem solved. Here, the manager's role from the existing, external hierarchical structure persists and penetrates into the work group whose members are ostensibly equal. Group dynamics, role confusion, and power disparities, amongst other potential reasons, could all be used to explain this behaviour / event. But, whatever the lenses of the viewers, roles do need to be considered.

There has probably been too little attention paid thus far to the multiplicity of roles in Communities of Practice or their role requirements. (Pavlin's 2006 consideration of roles in the investigation of a research institute Community of Practice is fairly unique.) In those CoPs observed here, it would be difficult to ascertain which roles were essential and which (if any) superfluous. Clearly, functional roles such as facilitator and logistical-administrative support are essential. Perhaps the purpose of the CoP determines the role requirements and their attendant skills. Some might need more project management skills, others to be highly creative, and still others to possess complex systems thinking and problem-solving skills. The converse may also be true, as some of the CoPs reported on here suggest: the composition of the CoP (members) determines in large measure its purpose. Such is the organic coming together of personalities in the formation of a community, and in the evolution of purpose over time. In any event, it is likely the case that a given CoP will manifest the personalities of its members in its general character or culture.

Emergent Phenomena. Communities of Practice will – with or without rigid operating guidelines and performance expectations – evolve in their own, unique ways. Any aspect conceivable might arise or change on its own. This should be expected and may offer the greatest potential of Communities of Practice.²⁹ Attempts to manage or control emergent phenomena may be resisted, would likely fail, and could possibly kill the CoP or undermine its creative, productive performance. In the author's experience with teams, CoPs, and other work groups, leaders emerge, goals and strategies arise, interpretations and understandings evolve, coalitions form and networks and relationships of all ilk develop—things, including the group as a whole, take on a life of their own, unpredictably. These emergent phenomena might be at odds with original intent or transcend all expectations. People with high needs for control and predictability will be uneasy as members of self-governing groups or as their managers. The self-directing MBA course on conflict and change the author once convened illustrates this well. The majority of students, including a minority who quit the course or never tolerated it, ranged from unconvinced to quite disturbed at the prospect and lived experience of designing and running the course themselves. While permitted to run its course, program administrators were doubtful and threatened by the potential fallout such a course could produce. In the end, a small minority loved the course and gained tremendously, while the majority came to accept the course as it was, found it at least interesting and different, and performed well enough on the assessments they all elected as a group.³⁰

Practice. Interestingly, practice emerges less potent as a theme in the present set of Communities of Practice than many of the other aspects considered. It may be that, in general, the goals of these CoPs were broader than typically conceived of as “practice” or governing the establishment of CoPs. Improving as a teacher and researcher, developing leadership capacity, and building community are presumably qualitatively different (albeit an assumption open to challenge) than objectives in more-defined trades and disciplines. The point is that practice – while giving initial impetus to groups to form (say, curriculum development or reform) – became less of a factor and the intangibles more so in some of the groups as they worked together. MetaCOP provides the prime example of such a community. “Practice” came to mean virtually anything related to personal and professional development or development of competencies outside initial parameters, such as the group electing to become a Centre of Excellence for Dialogue³¹. What seems most interesting, here, is that practice came to be meaningful in its own right—not practice as in a profession or discipline, but practice as in becoming, developing, improving, changing, and learning and leading as and through the group.

Granted this understanding of “practice” and these versions of Communities of Practice depart from more traditional definitions of CoPs. This underscores that views on CoPs continue to evolve and that, in practice, they may be quite different than the textbook depiction. More central to this paper is that the intangibles mentioned above defined the community for these CoPs and their members. Some of those intangibles include trust, respect, caring, and acceptance. These communities provided at least part of the means, support, motivation, direction, and space their members needed to practice or, as above, to become.

Community. There is no question that community, as understood here, was created and deepened as a result of working in and with Communities of Practice. One of the main factors contributing to this was a constant attention to and acknowledgement of community: as a virtuous cycle, the more participants attended to community, the more it grew. The more it grew, the more fulfilment they derived and the more they could see the rewards from their efforts.

²⁹ An increasingly rich body of literature exists on chaos, complexity, and dynamic systems theories, non-linear emergence, discontinuous change, and positive conflict and their contribution to creativity, resilience, innovation, and adaptation. See, as examples, Hays (2008b), Juriado and Gustafsson (2007), and Lichtenstein (2000).

³⁰ This experiment was reported on at a symposium on chaos theory in psychology and the social sciences (Hays and Wolff, 1996)

³¹ See Isaacs (1994), Isaacs (1999); or McKee, 2003 for detail on the theory and practice of Dialogue.

Reflecting on the level and kind of community experienced led members to further seek it and contribute to it. In the CoP dedicated to building community and improving the overall learning experience, members, themselves – their interpretation of community and its value and their self-referencing no doubt heightened by their task – became a vibrant community. Their enthusiasm was infectious across the university, with many students and some faculty members wanting to become involved. Implications for CoP strategies in community development are compelling. It should be said that building community was not an explicit goal initially, at least not for the majority of the CoPs. Community was arrived at through pursuing the more-explicit goals of task achievement, capability-development, and practice improvement.

Focus on community or enjoying its benefits was not for everyone involved, nor as strong in all CoPs. Some withdrew shortly after the first big wave of CoP formations. Some CoPs never really got off the ground. There will always be those driven more by concrete task accomplishment, individual recognition, or other needs than for community. This merely shows that CoPs cannot be mandated and that success is never guaranteed. Essentially volunteer organisations, CoPs will succeed to the degree that they meet the needs of their constituencies. There has to initially exist or evolve to be a purpose that draws potential members together. There also needs to be or develop a belief that that purpose (and other needs) can and will be fulfilled through working together. For this is what a community is: where one is willing to invest something of oneself and where the self and those contributions are valued by others, and where the benefits of contributing into the community outweigh the cost to the individual. Every community is premised on these principles, and is only so sustainable.

Relevance and Implications of the Inherent Themes

The 15 themes emerging from this study present a diverse range of characteristics of the Communities of Practice observed. As analysis is at the level of the CoPs, themselves, these features concern the composition and operation of the Communities of Practice more so than the environments in which they arose and function. The environment cannot be dismissed, however, as its culture and systems will penetrate and influence the kinds of CoPs forming and the ways they work. This should be a consideration in establishing Communities of Practice and in diagnosing problems and designing interventions. Members and prospective members will, perhaps unconsciously, bring their cultures with them to their CoPs, essentially replicating the larger culture.

This would be a concern if target Communities of Practice were envisaged as alternatives to standard organisational operation, say, to promote innovation or to allow for richer relationships to develop. Given this, the themes will have their correlate aspect in the larger organisational system, with alignment (or intentional incongruity) impacting on CoP effectiveness and sustainability. While any CoP theme can be analysed with respect to its organisational companion element, leadership, purpose, empowerment, and work tools and processes stand out as significant, with each, potentially, a “make or break” factor. If, as an example, the organisation is staunchly hierarchical, attempts to lead the CoP from within (as opposed to from above) may be thwarted. The traditional, expected ways of doing things and relating to each other and the rest of the organisation conflict with the democratic, egalitarian ethos (or aspiration) of the Community of Practice.

Success or Failure?

Over the course of two-plus years, Communities of Practice emerged as viable entities or failed to ever really take off. The 15 themes emerging from this study can be conceived of as success factors in CoP effectiveness and sustainability. The viable Communities of Practice continue to successfully deal with various dimensions of the themes. Meta-COP members, for instance, are aware that the Community of Practice is evolving and that it must continue to adapt to meet its members’ needs and fulfil a larger purpose. They possess the skills, abilities, and drive to do so. One or more of these factors were missing or problematic in those CoPs that failed to thrive. As an example, group dynamics and habitual patterns contributed to the death of one Community of Practice: a large majority of members were unable or unwilling to actually collaborate—to collectively generate a purpose to which members could all commit. There were many competing agendas, some unspoken, and no effective means for finding common ground. At the same time, they sought direction and leadership from the nominal leader and most senior member; again, unwilling or unable to assert their own leadership, self-direction, and agency.

Concluding Remarks

Practicing Community elevates Communities of Practice beyond their typical depiction, conceiving of them as both instruments and outcomes of meaningful change. Communities of Practice offer great promise as a change strategy, building community through community involvement and action, and developing capabilities amongst individuals and groups necessary for continual improvement and sustainability. In this conception, Communities of Practice are not just a mechanism for Knowledge Management, organisational learning, or any other specific initiative—though they may fulfil these objectives fully. They are hotbeds of personal and professional development and places of refuge from working environments that are seldom caring, compassionate, or forgiving. CoPs in the *Practicing Community* mode provide people with the space and time to discover themselves, and to learn more about their colleagues and other stakeholders and their organisation and its environment.

In the 15 years or so that the concept of Communities of Practice has been around, and increasingly in the past five years, they have been proven viable means of achieving numerous ends, from inducting personnel, through connecting people in global companies, to enabling inter-organisational partnerships. Their successes as parts of Knowledge Management programs and project initiatives and their contributions to creativity, flexibility, and responsiveness mean they are here for the foreseeable future. The fact that the majority of change projects still fail to substantively achieve their objectives (Ahn, Adamson, and Dornbusch, 2004; Smith, 2003) presents further case for employment of CoPs in change initiatives. Purpose, task-focus, complementary skills, commitment, and leadership, amongst other attributes, are essential to achieving sustainable change. CoPs exhibit those and additional characteristics. There may be no mechanism or approach that has a greater likelihood of assuring change initiatives undertaken can be brought to fruition.

Under-explored, however, has been the community aspect emphasised in this paper. Tapping into the potential of Communities of Practice to provide community is something that appears to warrant more attention. While there is no guarantee that Communities of Practice will provide that sense of community – fostering meaningful relationships and productive and fulfilling work – they have the potential to do so. On a hundred different occasions, in a hundred different ways, the voices of CoP members and workshop participants could be heard relating comments such as:

- *Why do I come to these meetings? They're fun. I feel like I can say and do whatever I please, and I'll be accepted.*
- *I like to come to work now.*
- *I didn't think it was possible to feel community amongst a group of virtual strangers.*
- *We need to have the kind of conversations we have here in my department.*
- *I've never heard people say things like that in public before.*
- *I've worked next door to people for 15 years and never knew them like I know you [the group].*
- *I believe we can do anything working together.*
- *I've learnt more about myself working with you [the group] than I have in my whole career.*
- *I've seen what a difference a small group of dedicated people can really make.*
- *Hugs are now genuine and welcome. Where else can I get one around here?*

The review of the literature conducted as background for this paper reveals that CoPs have been underutilised as a means for building community and community development. This comes as a surprise, as they seem perfectly suited to the task. Under-resourced and draining as community development initiatives may be, Communities of Practice can provide the nourishment, stimulation, and “back-up” needed to keep up a viable effort over the long haul. What is community development, after all, if it is not *Practicing Community*?

Exploration of the Communities of Practice referenced in this paper has generated 15 themes of relevance to the formation, operation, and sustainment of CoPs. Not all CoPs may require or manifest these same themes and other themes and factors may be more critical for other types of CoPs. This notwithstanding, consideration of the interdependent themes identified should help practitioners more fully understand what is going on in the Communities of Practice with which they are involved, and provide clues as to what to do should problems arise. These themes also point to many important avenues of research. Which of the themes, for example, are most pervasive across types of Communities of Practice and which are most central to performance? Also significant arising from this current research is that it takes time to build community—probably longer than it takes to make headway on tasks and more concrete initiatives. Given that, a practical if meaningful concern is what kind of organisation is willing and able to champion Communities of Practice such as described here? How many are out there? And, if they are bottom-up, grass roots initiatives needing momentum, what starts the ball rolling? Some catalyst or initiator is required.

Directions for Further Research

It seems a bit of a paradox and somewhat presumptuous to seek pointers for further research into Communities of Practice when over 500 journal papers have already undertaken the topic. This notwithstanding, a number of possible lucrative areas of research emerge from the author's review of the literature, the process of working in and with Communities of Practice, and the writing of *Practicing Community*. Some of the more germane research topics are enumerated here, with no implied precedence:

- This paper suggests that, under certain circumstances, Communities of Practice can be potent forces for change. More needs to be ascertained regarding those circumstances, and, more generally, when CoPs work and when they don't. What are the richest conditions for CoPs and what foment and enable change?
- *Practicing Community* also alludes to the fact that Communities of Practice may be quite different in industry than in academia and, perhaps, in other not for profits, as well. This concerns how they function (internally) as well as how they exist within their corporate structures. Do profit motive and cost, for example, determine their formation and management? Is it the autonomy of university life that encourages and shapes the development of CoPs?
- Little has been found in the literature that addresses the costs of starting and maintaining Communities of Practice. There is also little guidance on the practicalities of setting up and running CoPs. While the literature is rife with glow-

ing accounts of CoPs in action, there is much less concerning the real value and benefits, tangible or otherwise. What is the business case for Communities of Practice? Maybe more importantly, what is the price of “good community”?

- ❑ Much more needs to be understood regarding CoP interaction and group dynamics. Many aspects are worthy of pursuit: roles, leadership, creativity, self-governance, collaboration and collegiality. There is almost nothing on the human drama that must characterise Communities of Practice. If they are as rational, mechanistic, and functional as reports suggest, then they are cold places, indeed; certainly not the kind of environments aspired to in *Practicing Community*. If they offer such vast potential, what does it really take to liberate and capitalise upon that potential?
- ❑ There appears to be a need to investigate types and forms of Communities of Practice more thoroughly, and to explore in which contexts different types are more suited, and why.
- ❑ *Practicing Community* suggests that roles in CoPs are important, but it remains unclear just what the essential roles are, and whether or not they differ from roles in other work teams and groups.
- ❑ Finally, *Practicing Community* indicates that community may be found within the Community of Practice. With the understandable focus on practice, much of the promise of community has been overlooked. Meanwhile, people are starved for meaning, purpose, and community; and organisations and society are suffering the consequences. It has never been more important and appropriate than today for research to focus on sources of nourishment and fulfilment. When and how CoPs provide community and attendant benefits such as encouragement, support, and acceptance should be a research priority.

Communities of Practice have proven themselves to be effective instruments of change, task accomplishment, and professional development. *Practicing Community* introduces another potential significant advantage of CoPs, namely the community aspect. If meaning, purpose, and community are missing in many of our [work] lives, then sustainable performance must be affected or at risk, not to mention the costs to our mental and physical health. If, however, people can find psychosocial nourishment through community in Communities of Practice, they will be more resilient and have more to give to their jobs. And if they can master the practice part through the power of collective collaboration, they will surely be a force to be reckoned with.

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