

SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the activities and practices of leaders whose efforts to sustain their successful communities of practice have lessons for practitioners and researchers. These leaders kept their communities connected, helped them collaborate and working online to develop an area of expertise over sustained periods of time. The leaders attended both to assuring continuity and stability at the same time as they supported the evolution and transformation of their communities. The themes that these successful leaders focused on were: being together inside their communities, maintaining boundaries around their communities, and drawing nourishment from their communities' environments as they responded to environmental challenges.

KEYWORDS

Community of practice, leadership, online communities, community development

1. INTRODUCTION

Within communities the swapping of stories is a crucial means by which local theories of cause and effect are developed and contextualized. These stories provide powerful ways of invoking context, of framing choices and actions, and of constructing identity (Bruner, 2002). When observing communities from the outside it only seems reasonable that stories should play a key role in getting at all the complexity they entail. There is strong anecdotal evidence in the context of many communities of practice that authentic stories are of equal value to practitioners and researchers alike. This paper offers stories from the field, where community leaders describe how they sustain the lives of their communities of practice. Although their insights were elicited by asking them to tell their stories, the principles embedded in their stories are discussed in a somewhat more analytical form.

The work reported in this paper is an offshoot of an extensive research project carried out by the first author that examines cases of Internet-mediated communities of practice in depth. That study will eventually reveal rigorous and compelling evidence, gathered from a wide diversity of communities, to identify conditions sufficient for Internet-mediated communities of practice to be developed and sustained. That study synthesizes the top ten questions raised by participants in the Foundations of Communities of Practice workshop (<http://www.cpsquare.org/edu/foundations/>) over the past three years. Those questions were organized into a protocol for the semi-structured interviews that was also used in this study. The diverse and successful web-based communities of practice were identified through the authors' networks and their managers/leaders identified. Data were collected in a one and a half hour telephone interview. A community story was built from the interview responses for each leader of the diverse web-based communities of practice, and cross-case analysis carried out to produce the advice that forms the basis for this paper.

The role of the community managers we interviewed for this study can be described broadly as “leadership” – although from day-to-day perspective the work of these leaders varies broadly. Not all of our respondents would be characterized as leaders in the traditional sense, with content expertise and a long-term vision of the development of their discipline. All of them, however, were involved in decisions that embodied leadership in the day-to-day life of their communities. In the sense that leadership is distributed broadly in most healthy communities of practice, leadership is involved in the management, design, facilitation, coordination and maintenance roles. Hence, we refer to our respondents collectively as “community leaders” since analyzing the different ways in which they play their leadership roles in their respective communities is beyond the scope of this short paper.

The focus of this paper is on the second of the two topics found to be most frequently of interest to novice community leaders and designers: **sustaining** community. The first of these topics, *building community*, is dealt with in a companion book chapter the authors have in press (Stuckey & Smith in press, 2004). Access to the full case study data (Stuckey, 2004) and community manager interviews can be found at <http://www.cpsquare.org/cases/>.

2. SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

This paper reports on a significant phase of a web-based community’s life: the maintenance and sustenance that follows the blush of discovering value in being together. We explore the ways in which community leaders described the work of that phase of community life. This work can be mapped directly against the stages of communities of practice proposed by Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002 pp 68-69). While the building phase of community might be seen as covering the *potential*, *coalesce* through to *mature* stages described by Wenger et al., the sustaining of community takes its focus from the *mature* through the *sustain* and *transform* stages where maintaining the dynamic and energy of the established system is vital. The *mature* stage is where much of the work of managers and leaders involves encouraging new participation and engagement while trying to maintain high value for early adopters.

The importance of communities of practice and their generative capacity has been argued extensively (Wenger 1998, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002, Williams & Cothrel 2000, Davenport & Hall 2002) and other work they cite. For practitioners the kind of knowledge that makes up the practice of community cultivation is more situated and more accessible when communicated through stories rather than just as theory, decision points or sets of principles. Whether you subscribe to the explicit design principles in *The 5Ps (Ingredients of Community Building)* of Joseph Cothrel (2001), *The 9 Design Strategies* of Amy Jo Kim (pp. xiii – xiv 2000), or the 7 Design Principles of Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, (pp. 51, 2002), you will find added value in the story elements offered in this paper.

The elements presented are not an exhaustive set of conditions but as statements of some of the most compelling issues raised through listening as practicing community managers each speak about their communities. You will find a new meaning and clarity in the theory, rules and principles (recommended above) when you revisit them after reading this paper and each of the ‘fully-fleshed’ online case stories.

2.1.1 A brief overview of the communities

The following web-based communities are presented in alphabetical order: Australian Flexible Learning Community; ChevronTexaco's Operational Excellence Communities; CompanyCommand.com; Government Online International Network; Knowledge Management for Development; and the MirandaNet Fellowship.

Australian Flexible Learning Community

An Australian National Vocational Education Initiative providing professional development

The Australian Flexible Learning Community provides professional development to the vocational education and training sector across Australia. The community has more than 3,500 members who share resources and interact with each other in a web-based environment. The Community is an instrument of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework. It began in 2000 under a five-year plan to support the take-up of flexible learning in the Australian Vocational Educational and Training sector when the vocational and further education sectors faced a climate of great change. It has evolved to its present title and presence as part of the Framework's mission to encourage, but not mandate, flexible learning and online technology.

ChevronTexaco's Operational Excellence Communities

Management orchestrated groups in the service of strategic corporate goals

The corporation is made up of many independent companies operating in over 180 countries. It has chosen a communities of practice-based approach as part of its Operational Excellence strategy. This approach initially involves project teams designing practices (processes and tools) in various strategic areas, beginning with motor vehicle safety, contractor safety, reliability improvement and repetitive stress injury prevention. These teams expand and evolve into CoPs charged with supporting and sustaining the implementation of those practices. The corporation has a successful history with formal and informal CoPs, most notably successful communities built around best practices in refinery operation.

CompanyCommand.com

A community in the US Army ramping up the learning curve for command excellence from within

The seeds of this group were sown in 1992 with conversations among young practitioners sharing stories, books and tools they found valuable when preparing to take command posts. CompanyCommand.com is now a community with a mission to develop excellence in the practice of military command. This community allows those with ambitions for command to connect laterally to a larger world, introducing them to many styles of leadership and issues of battle-ready command. It creates an opportunity for the learning curve to begin well before officers actually take command of a company and the learning and contribution continues through their years in command and beyond.

Government Online International Network

Learning about e-government across international boundaries

The Government Online International Network community began in 1995-6, when a group of civil servants decided that they wanted to continue meeting after the completion of a G7-sponsored information technology project. They discovered that informal contact with colleagues was an opportunity to learn about current and future technology issues facing their governments. The community meets once a year for a three day face-to-face meeting and communicates regularly through an email list of some 80 members. The community organizes two or three projects each year, studying topics ranging from e-government in general to specific opportunities in the use of technologies such as XML.

Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev)

Supporting international development organizations in Knowledge Management

KM4Dev, which was formed after a face-to-face meeting in June 2000, is a community focusing on Knowledge Management (KM) issues in international development organizations such as donor agencies, civil society organizations, multilateral organizations and governments. Several organizations have supported the face-to-face events that launched and then developed the community, although Bellanet (a non-profit international secretariat based in Ottawa, Canada) has been its biggest supporter. Bellanet has developed infrastructure to enhance the basic email list services that make it possible to reach low-bandwidth areas in developing countries. It currently has about 240 members on the list.

MirandaNet Fellowship

Research and educational consultancy through a practitioner community

The MirandaNet Fellowship began its evolution in 1992 as a research project under the sponsorship Toshiba called The Miranda Project; at the time, this involved 15 classroom educators and researchers. At the close of the project, people wanted to maintain the community and it was decided to establish MirandaNet. An ongoing stream of research, assessment and demonstration projects, some funded, others supported by volunteers, have provided a rich environment for learning and sharing. The community has a clear trajectory for its 150 members who apply, or are recommended for membership, as MirandaNet Scholars. After publishing within the community or making a clear contribution, MirandaNet Scholars become Fellows, who are the inner circle of and mentors to the larger community.

1.1 Sustaining a successful community of practice

Having built viable and lively communities, all of the community leaders interviewed in this study were actively engaged in sustaining their communities, introducing topics that were “new enough,” welcoming new members, and experimenting with new alliances, activities, technologies or means of bringing the community together. As they listened to community members, launched new projects, or otherwise coped with change, they preserved their social capital and designed their community’s futures. For these leaders and their management teams, the design and development process is ongoing, suggesting that the notion that a community can ever be completely “built” may be a terrible misconception. Communities do not “run themselves,” regardless of how well the fundamental dynamics of a community may have been set in motion. In this sense, ongoing design is an activity of each community with regard to its own infrastructure as well as its own practice (Fischer, 2002; Engeström 2002).

A community’s ongoing life seems to be a delicate balance between stability and change: if there is too much change, its sense of identity dissipates. On the other hand, if change is resisted or ignored or arrested, a community’s relevance and vigor can dwindle. The three main themes that emerged from conversations with these community leaders were: sustaining the community’s being together around practice; maintain boundaries around the community that are clear, permeable, and distinctive; and, carefully draw nourishment from the environment and respond to environmental challenges creatively. For each of these three themes, the section first asks what community leaders are doing to maintain the status quo. Next, the issues asking what community leaders are doing that seems aimed at community evolution or change. On some level there always seem to be two faces of the same coin as leader’s work in their communities. Our research shows leaders engaged in sustaining equally each of the dimensions of a community of practice proposed in Wenger (1998) and Wenger et al. (2002) of domain (body of the knowledge), community (relationships, social capital), and practice (professional activity).

1.1.1 Sustain the community's being together inside the community

The community leaders were sustaining the stability of community togetherness by continuing the developmental work they began earlier on. In every case, leaders **participated** in the life of their communities. Leadership *in absentia* was never under consideration. To preserve the quality and focus of the discussion was vital for most communities. For example, one community manager said he was never absent from his community as he continues to moderate every message that is posted in an effort to adhere to the protocols of the community. It is only because of that attention that members can intelligently discuss the impact of a tender, its timeliness, or what it might be missing while perhaps preparing competing bids.

In addition to sticking to the subject of conversation, community leaders worked at keeping members involved in the community. For example, Christina Preston claims that, "Nobody ever **leaves MirandaNet**," because people stay involved for the meaningful and legitimate work in the community, even in cases where they have moved on from their jobs as classroom teachers. Without formally invoking the Chatham House rule¹, the *Government Online International Network* community is careful to structure projects (and the acknowledgement of contributions to projects) so that any disagreements with their own governments or agencies are not a barrier to contribution nor are they exposed inappropriately.

In a sense, the way the US Army structures cohorts of commanders is a challenge to the stability of a community of practice. *CompanyCommand.com* is an interesting case because the role of company commander lasts for 24 months at most; as some years have now elapsed since the community's founders were in that role, they make extraordinary efforts to stay in touch with command **in practice and on the ground**. They make an effort to bring in the voice of current and prospective commanders, whether in the monthly newsletter or in the online discussions. The energetic and sincere engagement of *CompanyCommand.com* leaders with their community is a powerful proxy for the actual practice of the community which has shaped their identity.

Holding a 10-year birthday bash for the community, where 12 *MirandaNet* colleagues told their personal stories and where community members in general can celebrate and reflect on their time together, reconnects the community, sustains it, and moves it forward. The *Australian Flexible Learning Community* postcards from Flexible Learning Leaders posted on the web site celebrate the work of innovators building flexible learning practice and Learnscope teams publish updates on the progress in their training organizations. Company Command promotes a member to be Command Contact of the Month and gives a face to the goals of excellence.

Sustaining a community of practice involves deliberately responding to change in a community's life together as well. In the case of *KM4DEV* change has come both in the form of new topics and of new people. It has seen an expansion of its domain, from the application of knowledge management in NGOs concerned with economic development to later including the importance of knowledge in economic development. It has also seen the entry of academics and consultants who are interested in the community's domain but whose work is more academic compared to the perspective of the practitioners who originally formed the group. Both of these changes were mentioned in a self-study based on an email survey that community leaders completed in the fall of 2002 and both are complex leadership challenges. Some members saw these changes as strengthening or enriching the community's dialog, while others saw the changes as diluting the community's focus or as admitting too many 'outsiders'. Community leaders were pondering whether the community should be divided into sub-communities or whether the tension between the different topics and perspectives was a creative one.

¹ The Chatham House Rule is: "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed." It's described here: http://www.riia.org/riia/scan/st=sql/fi=pages/sf=page_ID/se=2/va=thisSection%3dabout/va=SectionID%3d1/va=thisPage%3drule/sp=content/ml=1/fp=content.html accessed December 29, 2003.

Sensitively and systematically gathering feedback from members at the centre and periphery is a key activity described by all community leaders. The *Australian Flexible Learning Community* leader was advised by a “brain trust”—a group of creative and passionate people chosen to think outside the box who would advise on community direction on a regular basis. The *KM4Dev* and *MirandaNet* leadership gathers feedback at every face-to-face event and *KM4Dev* recently the self-study mentioned previously. One community gathered interesting feedback about community value when leaders raised the issue of member subscriptions and *CompanyCommand.com* has taken numerous opportunities for feedback in face-to-face events, on its website, and through email.

A community’s very success can lead to changes in how it organizes its togetherness. As *CompanyCommand.com* grows and attracts more volunteers, the leadership team has to work to preserve its original intimacy through frequent face-to-face meetings, or weekly telephone calls, at a minimum. In addition the leadership team is forming new sub-teams of volunteers and exploring how to organize and support local conversations on the US Army’s far-flung bases, along the lines of FastCompany’s Company of Friends.

1.1.2 Maintain boundaries around the community that are clear, permeable, and meaningful

Just as a community’s identity is formed and sustained around the life inside the community, maintaining appropriate boundaries is a key leadership task that sustains a community’s identity. Paradoxically, communities need to be both closed and open at the same time. The *Government Online International Network* community never advertises or recruits members, but it readily accepts new members when a national government asks to join. *CompanyCommand*’s practice of actively scouting the entire US Army for stories and contributions exemplifies the way many of the community managers work to keep discussions lively and resource offerings on the cutting edge. On another level, the inherent community turnover implies ongoing recruitment, often by means of non-public and invisible activities, such as personal correspondence and phone calls with community members. One manager suggested that more than 25% of a community facilitator’s time is devoted to private dialog.

At the same time as they sustain the clarity and integrity of their community’s boundaries, community leaders deal with and actually promote change in those boundaries. *KM4DEV* is an email-centric community and the leadership team’s attempts to involve members in teleconferences to plan future events have so far been met with low attendance: community inertia, including resistance to changing boundaries, may be vital information. “Transformation,” referring to a re-invention of the US Army based on technology and learning that is being driven by the top of the organization, is new kind of topic at *CompanyCommand.com* in the sense that it’s an “official topic,” but community leaders have framed it according to the community’s traditional values of integrity and local practice.

1.1.3 Carefully draw nourishment from the environment and respond to environmental challenges creatively

Both the community and its leaders need resources to sustain the community’s work, so drawing appropriate nourishment (i.e., new topics or new blood and probably new money) from the environment is a key consideration for community leaders. *Government Online International Network*’s discipline of living within its resources, only taking on projects that are affordable and directly relevant to its members (despite the vastness of potential topics), has kept it alive, maintained its intimacy and supported modest growth. Both the *Australian Flexible Learning Community* and *MirandaNet* have turned the demands that their members face in their own work settings into a resource of a kind, whether for mutual emotional support or for concerted study. The passion with which the community leaders sustain their communities is based on the assumption that the practice inherently has positive externalities: the community’s practice benefits the world, not only is member practitioners. Each community and each leader has a unique approach to linking

those benefits to the resources needed for the community, whether through tenders like *MirandaNet*, through government funding like the *Australian Flexible Learning Community*, through temporary funding that leads to part-time leadership support like *ChevronTexaco*, or through volunteer labor like *Government Online International Network*.

The resources that are drawn in to support a community have a subtle but somehow relentless transformative effect. The *CompanyCommand.com* Newsletter may advocate a very traditional goal of “fighting fiercely”² but it definitely takes a non-traditional approach to it. Inviting guest speakers into an ongoing conversation is another kind of community nourishment: A number of communities reported recruiting guest speakers who respond to all messages on a specific topic, bringing a new voice and point of view to a subject such as legal issues in e-commerce which has been previously established as important to this community. The Australian Flexible Learning Community also has its “Expert Spruik” (expert guest speakers) to continually enhance the community dialogue. As *MirandaNet* bids on new projects and seeks new funding from industry, it finds new resources to sustain the community, which may lead in turn to new opportunities and new challenges.

While community leaders are sustaining their communities in unique ways, the commonalities suggest an emerging practice of community cultivation, applying a complex body of knowledge in a skilful and situated way, which informs this work. Leaders can learn from each other and hopefully readers can also learn from them: hence these stories.

3. CONCLUSION

The work of cultivating a community of practice cannot depend on formulaic recipes or quick-fix solutions. Reflection on the stories that community leaders tell about themselves and their communities is a more accessible and reliable complement to the analytic models that prevail in the literature. In their stories, community leaders were engaged in an ongoing process of development and self-design that responded to opportunities and challenges as they arose. They were engaged variously in a range of political, organizational, technical, social and financial activities that sustained the life of their communities. The commitment to invest time, effort, and take significant risks is combined with a familiarity with the landscape and an understanding of the needs of practitioners to enable growth and sustained development. That same commitment informs an understanding of the high standards that make a community viable and suggest how those standards play out in practice. Although these community leaders are taking advantage of the Internet and the tools it currently provides, they are uniform in their understanding of the importance of sociability and community beyond the constraints of any technological platforms. Opportunities for face-to-face interaction were sought out and integrated effectively with other media when available.

The complexity of each community described in this paper was remarkable. Each contained a series of ongoing conversations and activities braided into a larger whole. All members see a different strand of the community as well as of the practice around which the whole is formed. Although the leaders of these communities make some of the largest contributions, they also benefit in the sense of being able to see more of what’s going on in their communities. Where a team led the community, it was interesting to find how close that group was and how much it also displayed the characteristics of a community of practice. Looking out from the middle there is also a rich and well-tended periphery in each of these communities, attracting people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

The sustained life and evolution of these communities was due to a deep commitment to integrity, and did not depend on marketing gimmicks of any sort. Evolution occurred slowly, in interaction with a complex environment. Pivotal in that growth was the caliber of leaders at the helm. Each community leader was unerringly attentive to new resources, new topics, new members, and new ways of hosting the community’s conversations. The openness of these leaders to new thinking brought a gradual but steady evolution to the conversations, the means of being together, and to the practice itself.

² See <http://www.companycommand.com/newsletter/nov02.htm> accessed January 6, 2003.

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