Communities of Practice in the Higher Education Landscape

A Literature Review

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Abstract

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are self-managed groups of people who have chosen to connect through a shared interest to learn reciprocally to improve their practice or craft (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Mercieca, 2017). Over time, these groups build a collegial relationship, through which they share experiences and ideas that nurture the group's passion for the topic(s) at hand and develop a "repertoire of communal resources" (Wenger, 1998). CoPs are growing in recognition and importance as a framework for shared exploration of topics of interest as a model for professional development within the higher education landscape (Tight, 2015).

While CoPs exist within many different types of organizations and for many variations of employee roles and types, this literature review explores the multiple dimensions of CoP, including the history, growth over time, current trends, evidence of best practices, and their significance to the field. In particular, the scope of the literature review focuses on the use and practices of CoPs within online, blended, and digital learning spaces.

History and Background

Humans have long gathered together with a shared purpose for learning. Yucatec midwives, tailors from West Africa, and modern meat cutters are just a few examples of shared learning within the professional learning context (Mercieca, 2016). Yet the term "community of practice" is relatively new, coined in 1991 by Lave and Wenger. A community of practice is a group of people convening around a common or shared topic for learning. Lave and Wenger (1991), who were at the forefront of articulating and defining the CoP concept, described a community of practice as an unstructured, ongoing, continuous, and naturally occurring learning process typical in traditional apprenticeships.

Lave and Wenger (1991) define a community of practice as "a set of relations among persons, activity, and the world, over time and in relation with other tangible and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98). The initial research by Lave and Wenger that coined the CoP term studied the process of participation by which apprentices entered a community on the periphery and eventually, through a series of actions, behaviors, and language, became centered in the community. This phenomenon was referred to as 'legitimate peripheral participation', which occurs when individuals cross boundaries as outsiders or newcomers and are offered possibilities for participation called peripheries. A newcomer's participation in a CoP often begins at the periphery – "a region that is neither fully inside nor fully outside" (Wenger, 1998, p. 117) and moves towards the center through growing involvement, towards full membership (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Essentially, as the learner transforms, the community changes and evolves.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) early work was focused on a theory that described how learning occurred through a situated process of participation and socialization. Over time, however, researchers and practitioners began to see CoPs in various settings and contexts, well beyond the formal apprenticeship systems the CoP term originated and operated within. Wenger's (1998) later work defined a CoP as bringing together a group of people (the community) who share a common interest, passion, or need and who seek opportunities to learn how to improve in the identified area through regular interaction. Wenger et al. (2002) further refined and clarified the CoP definition, stating:

A community of practice is not just a Web site, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process, develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. Having others who share your overall view of the domain and yet bring their individual perspectives on any given problem creates a social learning system that goes beyond the sum of its parts (p. 34).

Theoretical perspectives can help establish the context of a particular phenomenon or experience. Communities of practice are informed by several learning theories, including situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and social learning theory (Wenger, 1998). Situated learning theory is centered on the idea that the most favorable learning occurs within the context of real situations or authentic occurrences. Lave and Wenger articulate situated learning as "an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice" (p.31), which is captured in their descriptions of legitimate peripheral participation.

Social learning theory posits that learning occurs through the varied perspectives and experiences of group members, who, with shared issues and interests, work toward common goals. Akkerman et al. (2008) stated, "communities of practice develop around the things that matter" (p.384) which suggests that CoPs are sound examples of social learning theory in practice. Through this theoretical lens, communities of practice consider learning in a social context. Learning occurs through an interplay between our experience, social interactions within the group, and artifacts we create (Seavey & Tucker, 2018).

Arizona State University's ShapingEDU's Building Effective Communities of Practice (2022) offers a set of shared attributes of CoPs to help institutions, leadership, and practitioners level-set around the meaning of CoP work. These attributes include:

- A group of people;
- Shared interest or affinity (often, a profession);
- Engagement or shared activity with each other;
- A reason or purpose for interacting (often, a purpose beyond individual gain); and
- Mutual support, learning, and growth.

In addition to the common attributes, ShapingEDU's Building Effective Communities (2022) also shared several member-created definitions to expand further and, in some ways, clarify how a CoP might be defined. Some of the member-created definitions include "...sharing for the greater good,' "...build[ing] something they couldn't build individually," and "[creating] a safe space for learning and developing expertise."

The definitions point to a general sense of learning, collaborating, and growing together to pursue change for the better. Defining CoPs as a place for learning and improving practice translates well for CoPs that operate in scholarship, primarily through a variety of higher education settings and with topic-based stakeholders, because they serve as a strategy for individuals to discuss and address the challenges within the higher education landscape. Proponents cite CoPs as a practical way to develop and grow a scholarship of teaching and learning from the grassroots level, inviting participation from multiple perspectives (Adams & Mix, 2014; Corcoran & Duane, 2019;). These shared interests in learning bring a community of support and insight to CoP participants to develop and refine their professional practice into lasting changes.

Three Defining Characteristics of Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are groups of people who share information, ideas, resources, experience, and learnings about a common or shared area of interest (Wenger, 1998). The issues or interests a CoP might address vary across a spectrum of everyday challenges, new developments or opportunities, and emerging trends, while maintaining a focus on extracting and refining best practices within the higher education landscape. A few examples of existing CoPs focus areas include Weber State's "Facilitating Experiential Learning Online CoP," Boise State's "Emergent Teaching & Technologies CoP," South Puget Sound Community College's "The Trauma-Informed Classroom CoP," and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's "Online and Blended Teaching Program CoP." Through these community experiences, participants "interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 34). Wenger (1998) and Wenger et al. (2002) shared three defining characteristics of a community of practice: domain, community, and practice.

Domain

Community members have a shared domain of interest, competence, and commitment that distinguishes them from others. It forms the knowledge base from which the group will work. This shared domain creates common ground, keeps the CoP focused, inspires members to participate, guides their learning, and gives meaning to their actions. Over time, Wenger (1998) suggested community members develop a level of competence through engaging with problems, practicing, and trialing strategies, moving towards becoming experts in their chosen domain. When participants are able to discuss topics of "personal meaning and strategic relevance" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 32) in a trusting, collegial environment, the domain gives rise to energy and engagement among the community's members. Wenger et al. (2002) stress three criteria to help define the scope of the domain:

1. Focus on what is important;
2. Focus on aspects of the domain about which members are passionate; and
3. Define the scope wide enough to foster new participation and generate new ideas. (p. 75)

Community

Members pursue the interest (domain) through joint activities, discussions, problem-solving opportunities, information sharing, and relationship building. The community creates the social fabric for enabling collective learning and sustains the learning opportunity. A strong community fosters interaction and encourages a willingness to share ideas, participate, and meet regularly. Wenger (1998) maintains, "Whatever it takes to make mutual engagement possible is an essential component of any practice" (p.74).

Practice

Community members are actual practitioners in this domain of interest and build a shared repertoire of resources and ideas that they take back to their practice. Practice refers to the participants' ideas, symbols, artifacts, and analytic strategies. Practice “denotes a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem-solving, performance, and accountability” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 38). Arnold and Smith (2003) further note that “practice entails the learning that happens in a community, changing CoP and transforming member's identity and at the same time being transformed and changed as members manifest their identity within the community” (p. 6).

As the CoP develops, and members share collegial fellowship and learning experiences, the “practice” begins to emerge. Participants develop “a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.2). While the domain provides the general area of interest for the community, the practice is the specific focus around which the community develops, shares, and maintains its core of collective knowledge. In building this knowledge repository, or co-curated knowledge base, the developing and refining of practice is visible through shared knowledge, either through formal means or less formal evidence of daily practice. Through this practice element, as a baseline element of a community, both implicit and explicit understandings and products emerge and evolve in a participative community environment and deeply intertwine the “social and negotiated character of both in context” (Wenger, 1998, p. 47).

The presence of domain, community, and practice as interrelated elements legitimizes and sustains a community of practice (Wenger, 2011). The underpinning of practitioners learning through experience in a social context is the outcome of a CoP’s organic and flexible structure. Through relationships and trust, CoPs connect people with similar goals and interests to share resources, knowledge, dialogue, and reflections of learning. Effective CoPs are built with intention and patience, as trust and relationships can take time, thought, and skills to develop. Essential elements and strategies for creating and sustaining CoPs are discussed in the next section.

Establishing, Sustaining, and Nurturing a Community of Practice

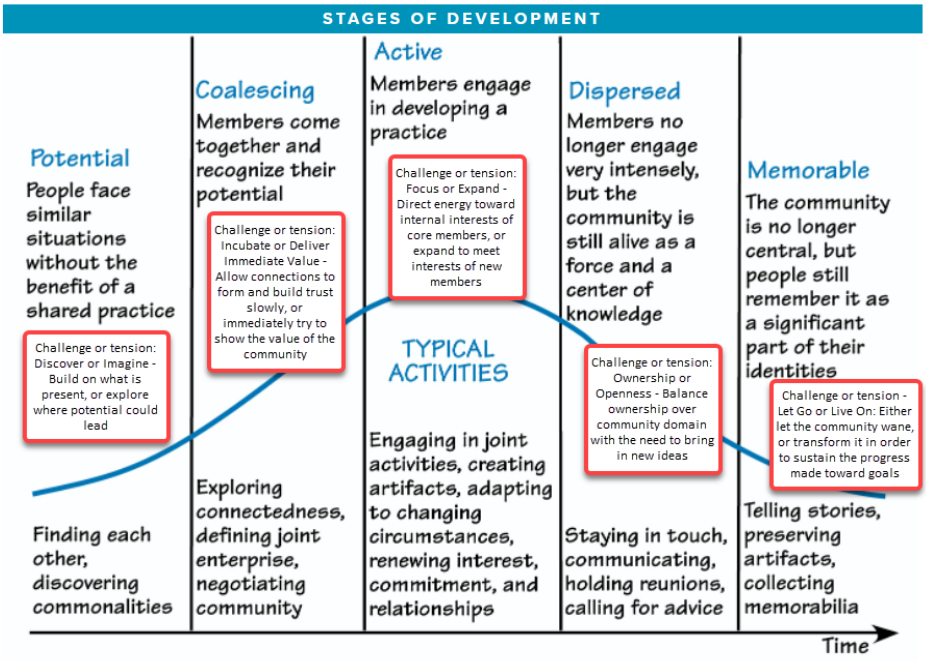
Communities of practice may take on different shapes and forms. At their core, CoPs are increasingly serving as avenues to improve and increase knowledge, expertise, and professional practice and make connections both within and across organizations. However, the design, outcomes, and structure of a CoP will vary depending on the purpose and needs of the participants. The highly contextualized and self-directed nature of CoPs makes creating and building a CoP challenging to prescribe. The design and success of a CoP may vary significantly based on the identified goals, outcomes, and interests of the group and the organizational cultures in which they reside. As a result, instead of rigid, lockstep rules, the steps and stages of development should be considered flexible guidelines (Brinton et al., 2021)).

Stages of Development

CoPs tend to go through a natural life cycle or stages of development. These stages of development, depicted by Wenger (1998) and Wegner et al. (2002) include potential, coalescing, maturing (or active), stewardship (or dispersed), and transformation (or memorable). The movement through the cycle or stages is often due to the organic nature of CoPs, a result of the community's growth. A brief description of the stages and typical activities within each stage is included in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Stages of community development, typical activities within each stage, and key challenges or tensions for developing communities of practice at each stage (Modified on work by Wenger et al., 2002



Communities of practice move through various stages of development characterized by different levels of interaction among the members and different kinds of activities.

There is no single best CoP design that guarantees efficacy, but the literature offers various design principles that can enable a community to meet its specific goals. A set of general principles and practices were identified by Wenger, et al. (2002) identified a set of general principles and practices as important for creating and sustaining a community for learning that leads to change:

1. **Design the community to evolve naturally.** The organic, dynamic nature of a CoP assumes its interests, goals, and membership are subject to change; it should be built to accommodate adjustments in focus.

2. **Create opportunities for open dialog among members and those bringing in outside perspectives.** While a CoP's most significant resource is its members and their knowledge, it is also beneficial to go beyond the community for additional ways to achieve learning objectives.

3. **Welcome and allow different levels of participation.** Wenger distinguishes three levels of engagement within a CoP. The first is a core group of very active individuals in the community, participating in conversations and projects. This group is often in charge of the community's direction. Second, an active group of people consistently come and contribute, although not to the same extent as the leaders. Third, there is a small group of members who benefit from their participation despite being passive participants in the community. The third category, according to Wenger, usually includes the majority of the community.

4. **Develop both public and private community spaces.** While most CoPs take place in public areas where everyone may share, discuss, and explore ideas, a CoP should also allow private conversations and information exchanges. Through a tailored approach based on specific needs, a CoP developed in this manner can organize relationships among members and access to resources.

5. **Focus on the value of the community.** Participants in a CoP should be able to explicitly discuss the worth and productivity of their engagement in the group.

6. **Combine familiarity and excitement.** A CoP is a safe space where people feel comfortable asking for help or advice. They serve as neutral places to discuss challenges, ideas, and perspectives without fear of being judged. Routine activities create a sense of shared adventure, while exciting activities, such as a project or event, provide stability for relationship-building connections.

7. **Find and nurture a regular rhythm for the community.** A CoP should organize a thriving cycle of activities and events that allows members to interact, reflect, and progress regularly. The rhythm, or speed, should maintain an expected level of interaction to keep the community vibrant but not to the point that it becomes cumbersome and overwhelming in its intensity.

8. **Create rhythm for the community.** There should be a regular schedule of activities, engagements, or connections that bring the participants together regularly, within the agreed upon constraints of time and interest.

From a practical lens, seen through the workings of an existing community of practice and members' experiences in those communities, attention should also be given to the CoP logistics, management, and considerations on the ground. Wilson-Mah and Walinga (2017) engaged in an action research project on two existing CoPs, “Higher Education Trends CoP” and “Women in Leadership CoP,” to explore “the emergence of interdisciplinary communities of practice in a university context and to reflect on the practice of convening a CoP” (Wilson-Mah & Walinga, 2017, p.24). The findings identified three key principles to support a community of practice (Wilson-Mah & Walinga, 2017): convening, curating, and emerging/emergence. The principle of

convening signifies the importance of someone taking the lead on logistical issues, such as convening the group, arranging for physical or virtual meeting space, coordinating schedules, and providing additional tertiary support, such as food and beverages, materials, or technology. The principle of curating calls for a knowledge management plan and response, perhaps through structure or tools that ensures the data, ideas, solutions, and other artifacts are captured in a systematic, practical, sustainable, shareable, and organized way. The principle of emerging/emergence commits to ensuring the group and its activities support a responsive, engaged community, where issues and ideas arise from the group without constraint and with patience and tolerance for ambiguity and organic tangents in the discussion.

Wilson-Mah and Walinga (2017) also identified key practical issues that communities of practice need to consider to develop and sustain the community. These fundamental issues may vary depending on the context of the community or the nature and culture of the community, but failing to address practical issues for developing and maturing a CoP could risk derail a community's development and overall efforts. The key practical issues to address include:

1. **Membership.** Consider how to orient new members and manage requests to join to avoid uncertainty and confusion on who belongs and who decides who belongs. Determine whether the community can serve as a bridge between several employee classifications and if the variance in roles adds opportunity. Further, consider the logistical challenges of connecting with new employees to invite them to the community.

2. **Process.** Communities may need to consider how to use curation to establish a process and honor the "action research iterative process of reflecting on effects as a basis for modification, further planning, subsequent action" (p. 30).

3. **Leadership.** The traditional faculty leadership roles of "chair" or "director" are not necessarily applicable in a community where organic, emergent, self-sustaining interests are centered. Consider discussing the various roles of a CoP leader, which might include convenor, facilitator, curator, or documentor.

4. **Focus/purpose.** Wenger's (1998, 2002) principles of domain, community, and shared practice can help communities re-center their focus.

5. **Communications.** Central to any CoP's activities is the strength of its communication processes and structures. Communities should consider what channels and content will be shared or sustained, the process for accessing information, and the tool or platform used for logistics and documentation.

6. **Maintaining interest and commitment.** Focusing on the topics central to the community's interests and needs is critical for the group to continue to evolve. Managing the dialogue to center on trends at the beginning of a community can help to steer the conversation to related topics and subjects.

Once established, it is up to the CoP leaders to generate interest in the CoP's mission and recruit new members. The goal here is to ensure that the CoP grows in tandem with its membership and continues to reflect its members' needs and interests. Based on Arizona State University's ShapingEDU initiative, strategies for building effective communities of practice are discussed in the next section.

Building Effective Communities of Practice

Arizona State University's ShapingEDU initiative is a global community "dedicated to creating change so lifelong learners may thrive in the digital age" (Building Effective Communities, 2022). The initiative develops collaboration opportunities for folks from diverse, active communities of practice to form a community that works together to identify and solve challenges and leverage new opportunities, ideas, strategies, and resources to nurture, enhance, and celebrate teaching and learning practices.

ShapingEDU (2022) offers six best practices for building effective communities of practice, each with recommendations for institutions and organizations seeking to establish CoP opportunities:

Table 1

ShapingEDU's (2022) Six Best Practices for Building Effective Communities of Practice

ShapingEDU CoP Best Practice	Recommendations
Diversity and Inclusivity: Ensure well-rounded perspectives and voices from people of different backgrounds and different places.	• Work intentionally, step-by-step. • Include a variety of stakeholders. • Insist on inclusion. • Value diversity of viewpoints. • Recognize different backgrounds. • Seek representation. • Build with community members. • Acknowledge time differences.
Engagement and Collaboration: Engage your community where they are, through multi-channel engagement, with multiple ways to consume, create, and share information.	• Communicate regularly and relevantly. • Make it easy to participate. • Tailor engagement methods to your community. • Collaborate in both synchronous and asynchronous ways. • Foster civil discourse and inclusivity. • Listen. • Leverage individual strengths. • Establish processes to address conflict. • Connect with other communities. • Snowball member recruitment. • Use the community as a resource. • Don't be afraid to iterate.

Experience + Value Add: Learn why members are joining the community and nurture opportunities for those needs and sharing opportunities to evolve. Continuously invite feedback from the community to ensure fresh content is aligned with current community needs and overarching values/purpose.	• Meet (evolving) member needs. • Foster connection and belonging. • Use technology to connect people. • Develop mechanisms to give and get. • Provide recognition. • Focus on outcomes. • Provide structure for possible outcomes. • Support volunteer outputs. • Recognize that people will come and go. • Communicate the value of your involvement with the community. • Set participation expectations.
Leadership: Consider distributing leadership across the community to invite feedback and encourage engagement.	• Develop an initial core group. • Model leadership. • Value individuals over affiliations. • Encourage Turnover in Leadership Positions. • Distribute leadership and respect volunteers. • Cultivate passion. • Build trust among leaders. • Utilize a community manager. • Unite complementary strengths.
Shared Values + Purpose. Co-develop a defined mission and set of outcomes and use these collaboratively developed ideals to guide and reinforce the work of the community. Acknowledge that participants are unique individuals -- more than the affiliations they represent.	• Define a purpose. • Establish values with the community. • Choose values that reflect the community, and shape the community to reflect the values. • Focus on the community. • Consider the needs and values of sub-groups. • Articulate activity purpose. • Watch for and foster opportunities for evolution in purpose.
Structure + Processes: Establish clear metrics for success that include strategies for participant feedback. Establish rules and guidelines, including how to get started and operate within the community, but within an inclusive, flexible format.	• Build mechanisms to connect. • Provide a place for engagement. • Find the right place/platform for your community. • Develop an iterative improvement process. • Provide technical, budgetary, and logistical support and service. • Seek feedback. • Include members in the running of meetings. • Clearly define licensing expectations for work. • Set expectations for decision-making. • Formalize the capture of community work. • Set expectations for community members.

While every community of practice is designed, sustained, and nurtured differently, thriving communities call for intentional, conscious attention to the planning and engagement process, including both big picture considerations, and the operational considerations. As communities grow and develop, opportunities for

organizational support may arise. The following section details considerations organizations should make in supporting CoPs.

Supporting Communities of Practice: Suggestions for Organizations

Most communities of practice exist whether an affiliated institution or organization formally recognizes them. However, the organic, naturally developing nature of CoPs does not mean an organization cannot support or influence their development (Wenger, 1998b). The key to organizational or institutional support is to be careful not to smother or take control of the community's self-organizing structure and outcomes. Wenger (1998b) contends that the community's internal leadership is more important than organizational support and influence. This internal leadership can take many forms, such as inspirational leadership provided by thought leaders and recognized experts, interpersonal leadership provided by those who weave the social fabric, or boundary leadership provided by those who connect the community to other communities (Wenger, 1998b). These internal leadership roles may be organically created and managed, formal or informal, and may not be limited to a specific person or role. Wenger (1998b) asserts the most critical aspect is for CoP leadership to "have intrinsic legitimacy in the community." However, beyond the importance of CoP leadership Wenger (1998b) offers five key practices or strategies for organizations to nurture communities of practice:

1. **Legitimizing Participation.** Organizations can support CoPs by honoring and recognizing the work of contributing to and sustaining one, such as giving time to members to participate in the CoP.

2. **Negotiating their strategic context.** Organizations should develop a clear sense of how knowledge is linked to their strategic mission, vision, and values and use this understanding to help CoPs articulate and communicate their strategic values.

3. **Being attuned to real practices.** Some of an organization's critical knowledge already exists within its employees. Fostering and nurturing CoPs is an opportunity for organizations to leverage existing expertise and potential.

4. **Fine-tuning the organization.** The autonomous and intrinsic motivation of CoPs does not call for formal rewards and incentives. Still, organizations should be aware of environmental or cultural practices that inhibit involvement in CoPs or diminish the work done within them.

5. **Providing support.** While communities of practice are primarily self-sufficient, they can benefit from organizational resources, such as funding for outside experts, meeting spaces, or access to technology to support the community.

The organic, emerging, and sometimes flexible nature of CoPs can make it difficult for organizations to provide systemic, structured support. Further, CoPs exist within unique and situated organizational contexts that are influenced by the organization's culture, vision, mission, and values. However, establishing and supporting CoPs, particularly faculty-centered CoPs, is an effective strategy for supporting faculty through disruption and change and may result in accelerating organizational change (Mead, et al., 2021). The next section will look more closely at the landscapes of communities of practice in higher education.

Assessing Communities of Practice

Evaluating the CoP experience is a systematic and systemic opportunity to improve and celebrate the community's activities, learning, and expertise. While assessment and evaluation are not a requirement of

CoPs, planning for fluid, flexible assessments may increase accountability and expand opportunities for gathering, reflecting on, and sharing results within and outside the community (Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium, 2016). The assessment practice may also have the potential to communicate the value of the CoP to a greater community and legitimize the CoP's work when necessary.

Barab et al. (2012) designed a set of criteria that can be used to guide a Cop's evaluation, primarily by highlighting and emphasizing the social interactions that contribute to the collective practices where there is mutual interdependence. By comparing six central aspects of CoPs, each with three statements serving as criteria, to an existing CoP, evaluators can consider the extent to which the CoP matches indicators of success. The six characteristics for evaluating a CoP (Barab et al., 2012) include:

1. A common practice and shared enterprise;
2. Opportunities for interaction and participation;
3. Mutual interdependence;
4. Overlapping histories, practices, and understandings among members;
5. Mechanisms for reproduction;
6. Respect for diverse perspectives and minority views.

Indicators may be another strategy for assessing the work and elements within a CoP. Wenger (1998) also suggested fourteen indicators of thriving communities of practice that community members might use to evaluate the experience's process, practices, procedures, outcomes, and overall success. However, Li et al. (2009) found these indicators to be too abstract, broad, and difficult to use for measurement because no value measure has been used, making the results difficult to interpret. Another assessment tool for CoPs may be the Communities of Practices Indicators Worksheet created by the National Professional Development Center on Inclusion (NPDCI) based on community of practice scholarship (NPDCI, 2012). The document includes indicators with references for groups that are building or maintaining CoPs, serving as a tool for recognizing present strengths and shortcomings and identifying areas for improvement.

A qualitative evaluation approach might be another strategy for evaluating communities of practice. The University of Wisconsin-Madison's Office of Human Resources sought to answer the question, What high-impact possibilities could the UW open by nurturing CoPs? Through the lens of an impact report, Laursen (2015) described the process of a qualitative-focused set of evaluation methods, including reviewing meeting notes captured by the convener, using guided reflections with the convener to fill in gaps in the meeting notes, and deploying web-based surveys. Laursen (2015) stated, "...quantitative measures can only go so far with CoPs; the qualitative summaries—and the pictures!—do a better job of showing connection, meaning, and uniqueness" (p.5).

Through the data collection and analysis, Laursen (2015) validated Wenger's (1998) assertion that the three elements of CoPs, community, domain, and practice, are interrelated components that work together to tell a CoP's story. The evaluation process supported the need for the institution to learn more about the "unique, integral wholes (real communities) before we try to understand their impacts and decide what to do about them" (Laursen, 2015, p. 5). A change Laursen (2015) recommends for future CoP evaluation would be to use an evaluation framework, such as Kirkpatrick's Levels of Impact and Wenger's Identity Process.

Advancements Over Time

Cognitive anthropologists Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the term “community of practice” through apprentices' study as a learning model, where the community acts as a living curriculum. These situated learning experiences were created through a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By articulating the concept of communities of practice, researchers and scholars identified communities in multiple settings, contexts, relationships, industries, and spaces, even where no formal apprenticeship system was present. CoPs exist in multiple organizations and practical applications, such as business, government, education, professional associations, and other social sector arenas (Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Wenger’s (1998) work shifted from theory to practice as CoPs were being more widely recognized and utilized in formal organizational contexts, particularly around knowledge management. During this time, the social learning contexts of CoPs as self-directed, self-organizing systems provided pathways to problem-solving and sense-making within an organization. During Wenger’s later work (1998), the first notions of geographically distributed communities of practice were possible through technology-mediated infrastructures.

Communities of Practice Within the Higher Education Landscape

In the higher education landscape, communities of practice have been seen as an avenue to provide informal and specified spaces for faculty and other academics to share experiences, discuss strategies and approaches, and disseminate emerging and innovative teaching practices. MacGillivray (2017) stated, “We learn as we practice. We learn through dialogue with one another. We learn when we reflect and share our successes and especially our failures. We learn socially…” (p. 27). Seeing CoPs as social learning systems helps to describe their benefits in the context of the higher education landscape. These benefits include encouraging and promoting dialogue among faculty (Herbers, et al., 2011; Nixon & Brown, 2013), providing professional development avenues for faculty (Arthur, 2016; Bond & Lockee, 2018; Trabona et al., 2019), fostering self-awareness and reflective practice (Golden, 2016), and providing space to explore, discuss, and practice their teaching craft (Ward & Selvester, 2012). Yet, even with these benefits, some research found communities of practice have been slower to evolve in the higher education landscape (Tight, 2015; MacGillivary, 2017). The informality of learning, often a cornerstone of CoPs, may challenge the visibility and public acknowledgment that accompanies other types of formal learning (MacGillivary, 2017).

The perceived slow adoption or lack of awareness of CoP in the higher education landscape could be attributed to a few factors. MacGillivary (2017) attributes some of the challenges to the nature of higher education, often associated with credentials and structurally defined markers of attainment or expertise, such as hierarchical degrees, double-blind review processes, credit hours, and criteria for quality. Through Midgley’s theory of boundary critique, MacGillivary (2017) showed how those boundaries' judgments and values are interconnected. For example, informal learning, similar to that found in some CoPs, falls to the margins, relegating the CoP experience and the work that occurs in them as potentially not valued by those in the core. MacGillivary (2017) argued that one way to address these boundary challenges is to illustrate where CoP work has been valued, allowing them to cross the boundaries towards the primary and secondary core within Midgley’s theory.

Virtual Communities of Practice

CoPs exist in both physical and virtual settings. According to Wenger (2001), providing opportunities for the development of online communities of practice has the potential to facilitate and enhance informal learning, and the networked environment can provide the necessary interactions for CoP (Wenger et al., 2002). While Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the phrase community of practice, virtual communities of practice (vCoPs) are used to describe this type of similar, situated learning, but in a dispersed or distributed setting. Through Wenger's (2015) Communities of Practice model, which serves as the basis of social learning capabilities within communities, the term 'virtual' was added by some researchers and scholars to honor the geographically dispersed communities of practice and recognize the geographically extensive membership of these communities of professionals or students (McLoughlin, 1999). Embedded within the term "virtual communities" are two distinct concepts: 1) virtual learning communities and 2) distributed communities of practice. Daniel et al. (2003) defined a virtual learning community as "a group of people who get to pursue learning goals" (p. 126). Conversely, a distributed community of practice is defined as "a group of geographically distributed individuals who are informally bound together by shared expertise and shared interests or work" (Daniel et al., 2003).

Current Trends and Practices

Motivations for convening a community of practice vary, but at the most basic level, a group of people comes together because of a shared learning need, one that they seek to learn more about in connection with others (Wenger et al., 2002). By engaging over time with one another through collegial, collaborative, shared, and collective learning, the members of the community develop relationships built on trust and intention that drive the support needed to influence and develop their practices. Mead et al. (2021) researched a group of faculty from multiple disciplines who were CoP members and found that their shared experience, starting with understanding the community's outcomes and purpose, helped the group develop personal connections and the trust needed to be vulnerable in their shared work. This section highlights the current trends in the field, examples of existing communities of practice, and other influences on the changing landscape of communities of practice.

Communities of Practice and the COVID pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic created a paradigmatic case for the overall nature and process for CoPs in higher education. While some CoPs were already functioning in virtual and online spaces (vCoPs), the pandemic created an opportunity and a challenge for how CoPs would function in times of crisis, particularly when traditional operating protocols and strategies were unavailable (Bolisani et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic challenged many existing organizational processes, procedures, and practices, including how a CoP functions within existing and pending disruptions of the pandemic and any future catastrophic events similar in scope and scale. The pandemic also highlighted how CoPs might support faculty, staff, and leaders through disruption and crisis.

One example of CoP support during the pandemic was through a study by Mead et al. (2021) which examined how a CoP supported a cross-disciplinary set of faculty to offer a creative, sustainability-focused curriculum while helping faculty remain resilient as educators. The study found the resilience of participants in the CoP, through the height of pandemic disruption and change, was important in sustaining and supporting the faculty. More specifically, Mead et al. (2021) found that the resilience of the faculty involved in the CoP was magnified by the social support of the community, which aligns with existing literature (Grunspan et al., 2020).

The lessons learned through pandemic-facing CoPs and the growing body of evidence supporting vCoPs continue to unfold. Gedro et al. (2020) described the importance and criticality of creating safe spaces for academics to offer support, discuss self-care practices, and offset the sudden stressors that a pandemic brings to their responsibilities. Tucker and Quintero-Ares (2021) reached similar conclusions when they identified faculty communities as a critical support element for both their professional roles and their socio-emotional needs. These communities created spaces where they could express their feelings about how their roles as educators changed, to understand student responses to the pandemic, and navigate life changes during the crisis (Tucker and Quintero-Ares (2021).

Communities of Practice for Adjunct and Globally Dispersed Faculty

The increasing trend in higher education is to hire adjunct faculty to teach online courses (Magda, et al., 2015). Due to this trend, many online adjuncts will never physically visit their college's campus. This reality presents multiple challenges for an institution. Some of these challenges include lack of preparation to teach (Hanson et al., 2018), limited access to professional development which may affect course quality (Benton &

Li, 2015), difficulty providing support away from the physical campus (Schnitzer & Crosby, 2003), disconnectedness from the university (MacGillavry, 2017), and feelings of isolation (Samuel, 2015).

Focused vCoP and CoP research on adjuncts is vital as institutions find their global presence, including the disbursement of faculty across geographical areas, increasing due to growth and COVID pandemic-related shifts. Institutional leaders will need to find ways to connect and engage with all faculty, especially those who are dispersed. Valenti and Sutton (2020) discussed the importance of vCoPs "to create flexibility to situate the information being communicated so that it is available at the time of need and to accommodate the geographical separation imposed by each member's home location" (p. 121). This reality highlights the intention and care needed when planning vCoPs, because if they are not structured appropriately to account for distance and time, joining a vCoP may be a big lift for adjuncts. In general, adjuncts tend to manage large teaching loads, hold multiple jobs to support themselves, and are sometimes asked to take on additional responsibilities with no compensation (MacGillavry, 2017).

The challenges, opportunities, and benefits of engaging adjunct faculty through virtual communities of practice (vCoPs) were researched by Cottom et al. (2018) and Valenti and Sutton (2020). Cotton et al. (2018) found that vCoPs benefited adjunct faculty's sense of belonging as described through feelings of validation, community support, and instructor efficacy. Further, the faculty indicated that the experience would improve their pedagogical practices. Valenti and Sutton (2020) found that inconsistent and irregular communication patterns may adversely affect adjunct faculty, mainly as they relied more heavily on departmental communication than the identified CoPs. The findings also suggested multiple improvements to CoPs, including developing an established and flexible CoP, consistent with research by Webb (2013). The results also pointed to more structured communications related to course content and teaching assignments, more comprehensive introductions to and networking opportunities with other faculty, and more intentional and deliberate consideration to distance attendees during various professional development experiences (Valenti & Sutton, 2020).

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Development through Communities of Practice

MacGillavry (2017) framed CoPs within the concepts of boundaries, where crossing among and between them can help to elevate the learning and work within a CoP. In the context of CoPs within the higher education landscape, boundary crossing takes on another meaning, particularly for academics pursuing the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) context. Kensington-Miller et al. (2021) described the boundary crossing experiences of seven diverse SoTL scholars spanning four countries. Conceptualized within the framework of Wenger-Trayner's (2015) landscape of practice, Kensington-Miller et al. (2021) found unique and assorted communities exist, each with their own boundaries, such as disciplines, epistemological differences, or positional differences; crossing these boundaries is essential to fully open opportunities for new learning. The boundaries can close or open doors to the community that may feel mysterious and unfamiliar, leading to misunderstanding and confusion (Kensington-Miller et al., 2021). However, learning across these ambiguous and murky boundaries can also "hold the potential for unexpected learning"(Wenger-Trayner, et al., 2015, para 17). This potential makes the CoP model a solid framework for academics exploring and working within the SoTL landscape (Tierney et al., 2020).

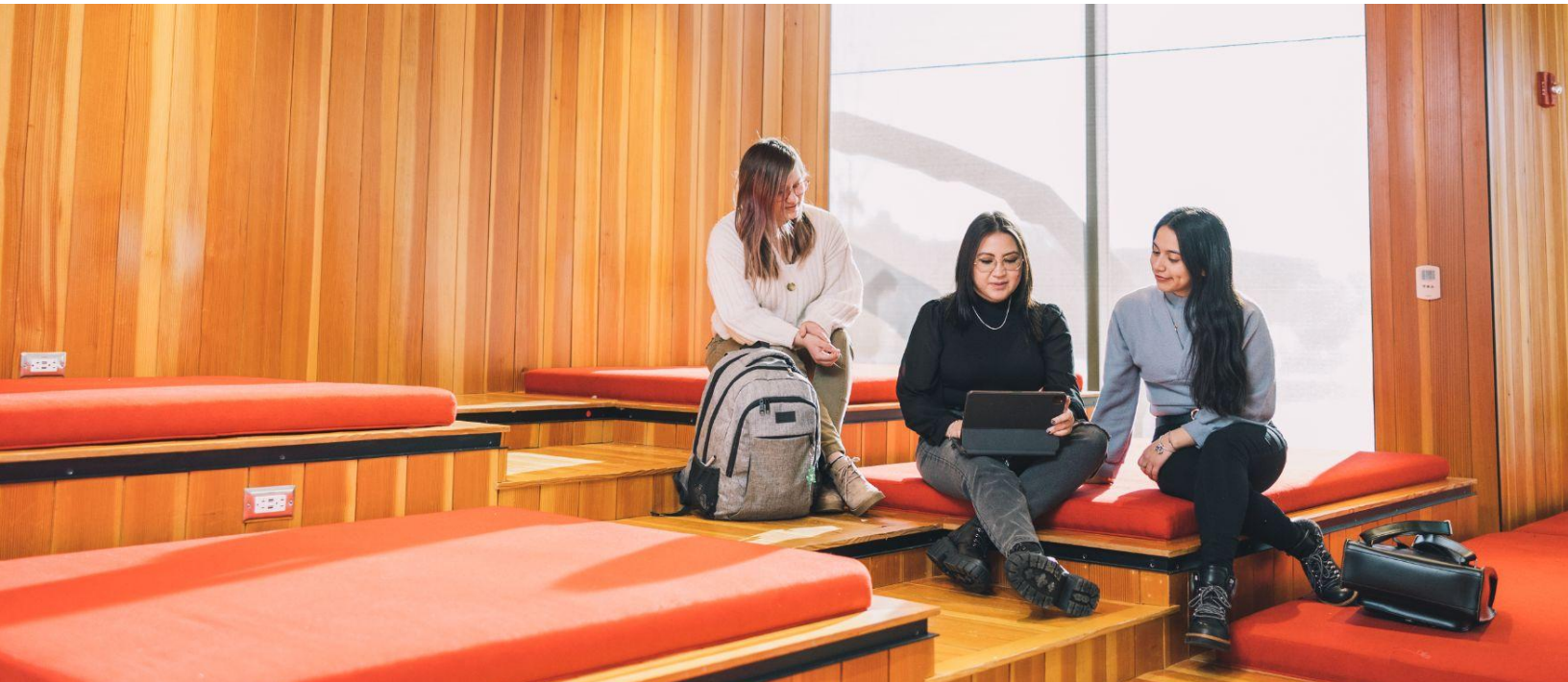
Communities of practice within the context of SoTL are not new. Fanghanel (2013) saw a direct connection between CoP frameworks and the SoTL journeys of academics: "SoTL is a community of practice engaged in testing and critiquing pedagogical principles across disciplines" (p.65). Other researchers have also found that communities of practice can improve teaching and learning (Sherer et al., 2003), particularly for early-career academics (Cox, 2013), by encouraging dialogue, constructing knowledge, and supporting

learning through practice (Ardichvili et al., 2002). Tierney et al. (2020) found communities of practice especially beneficial to academics who were not formally trained in teaching and learning or scholarly practice. They also identified benefits of academics working with communities outside of their departments and institutions that provide critical support for SoTL, particularly when expertise and support are not available within the academic's personal and professional sphere, such as their department, school, region, state, or country.

Social Media and Communities of Practice

Wenger's (1998) earlier work suggested the potential value of leveraging social media in CoPs by noting the importance of forming online support communities whose members are geographically distant (Wenger 1998, 175). MacGillavry (2017) discussed the "hashtag phenomenon" of Twitter as an example of scholars and academics wanting to connect more and in new ways. Hashtags help people with similar interests find one another while filtering out the "noise" of social media. Twitter chats and social media sharing may be a way to engage in a CoP-like experience. MacGillavry (2017) shared an example of a scientist who used a hashtag to question some potentially egregious behavior in higher education. The Twitter interchanges were a "community of practice-like sharing resources, experiences, and tips" (P. 41). Such academic activities on Twitter demonstrate a desire or need to connect and interact, even through hashtags on a social media platform (MacGillavry, 2017).

A challenge with technology-mediated communities is the varying roles participants take within the community and the potential for inactivity or 'lurkers', who may not actively engage in discussion or contribute to the CoP. Hill (2013) identified four types of learners in online communities, including lurkers who observe and sample a few items, drop-ins who are partially active, passive participants who consume and expect to be taught, and active participants who fully participate. Honeychurch et al. (2016) reframed some of the research on lurkers by focusing on what they do rather than what they do not do. They argue that lurking can be a positive action that empowers independent learners (Honeychurch et al., 2016). Lave and Wenger (1998) describe lurkers as legitimate peripheral participants within a community, where they may be looking for new ideas, strategies, and opportunities to try something new. A study by Robinson et al. (2020) explored how technology and social media are used by educators when learning in a community. They found some community participants may move from lurker to participant from one community to another, taking on different roles as their personal and professional networks expand (Robinson et al., 2020).



Challenges and Limitations

Communities of practice are not without critique, limitations, and challenges. The biggest challenge to CoPs is a lack of time, defined as "the ability for a given community of practice to engage in prolonged, sustained discourse or the ability to structure a given period (e.g., a specific day of the week) to participate fully in a community of practice" (Kerno, 2008, p.73). Research done by Wilson et al. (2020) found that senior staff and faculty were less likely to participate in CoPs, which may also be attributed to lack of time. The non-participant survey results suggest that increased workload was a barrier, along with "they were too busy" and "they had other commitments" (Wilson et al., 2020). Within the educational setting, instructors and educational personnel have high-demand work that can leave them overwhelmed (Hemer, 2014) and it can be difficult to find adequate time for instructors to meet in groups. For many faculty, CoPs fall into the "important but not urgent category, even if they seem appealing" (MacGillivary, 2017, p. 31). Because of limited time, instructors can regard their participation in CoPs as an infringement on their time (Hairon et al., 2014). Additionally, the numerous cases of COVID-19 and pandemic-related burnout further limits the mental, emotional, and intellectual energy faculty may be able to dedicate to work that does not fall directly within their teaching and research responsibilities (Flaherty, 2020; Taylor & Frechette, 2022).

Wenger, et al. (2002) explain that proponents of CoPs as a framework for creating and systematizing knowledge recognize that there can be limitations and negative experiences within CoPs. "The more quickly a community—or those leading and supporting it—can see a disorder emerging, the sooner they can act to correct it. Successful communities acknowledge their weaknesses and leverage this awareness to spur their growth and reaffirm their long-term viability" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 150). Some of the 'diseases' within communities of practice can include clique formation, mediocrity, disconnectedness, power struggles, laissez-faire leadership, limitation of innovation, and exclusiveness with regard to membership. Other limitations and challenges to successful CoPs include organizational hierarchies and regional culture (Kerno, 2008). MacGillavry (2017) pointed to the expert culture within higher education as a potential challenge, where a central part of many academics' identity is their deep expertise in a specific context, which could impede their willingness to join a CoP or admit they do not have a certain kind of expertise. Specific to regional culture, Sadiq (2020) suggested it can impose barriers "to global communities unless there is a commonality that transcends cultural groupings" (p.139). Another challenge is that the CoP concept can be used as a catchall to represent any kind of group work or social learning without having any analytical or evaluative rigor in their processes or outcomes (Barab et al., 2012).

Communities of Practice Versus Learning Communities: Similar But Different

Practically speaking, humans are involved in multiple communities at any given time, such as family units, hobby clubs, sports teams, or religious study groups. Humans learn both independently and collectively, and communities provide a space, place, and process to support that learning. In an educational setting, professional learning communities (PLCs) or faculty learning communities (FLCs) and CoPs have long been used as a way to support educators in building their capacity for and sustaining change (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). While the naming conventions for different groups and types of communities vary, Wenger (1998) used the social theory of learning to highlight a shift away from learning as an individualized process to one that places "learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world" (p. 3), connecting learning to a social phenomenon.

The labeling of these social learning communities has sometimes conflated them into seemingly synonymous labels, most notably limiting the distinction between CoPs and FLCS/PLCs. The distinction is even cloudier when considering if an FLC/PLC is a CoP or whether a CoP is an FLC/PLC. According to Wenger (1998), an FLC is a special kind of "community of practice." It involves the three elements of a CoP: it involves a community, it has a domain, and it involves a set of practices. To the casual observer, the two experiences are similar and share certain attributes, such as engaged learning, community building, critical reflection, problem-solving, and an interest in supporting both shared and individual needs and growth. However, a more detailed look at the differences between a community of practice and a learning community reveals stark differences.

Chingren (2005) described a few key differences between communities of practice and learning communities. First, communities of practice go beyond "learning by doing" or gathering together to discuss shared interests. Instead, CoPs necessitate situated learning that requires participants to be fully engaged in generating and making meaning, within a specific practice. Second, within CoPs, the knowledge shared centers around a specific context, driven by and relevant to the community. Third, a significant purpose or outcome of CoPs is to gradually develop less-experienced members (i.e., apprentices) through shared community values and varying levels of contribution to the community's context. Conversely, Chingren (2005) noted a learning community may form because every member needs development and, unlike a CoP, there may be an expectation for equal participation and contribution from each member.

Blankenship and Ruona's (2007) comparison of multiple PLC and CoP models highlighted distinct differences between the two models, including varying nuances in terms of membership, leadership, and knowledge sharing, which may complicate one's need to define and operationalize these concepts. The distinction between PLCs and CoPs is important because the expectations, outcomes, and structure of each are different, and the intention built into each of these unique opportunities may influence the participant's overall experience. Table 2 highlights some of the key differences between the two frameworks.

Table 2

Differences between Faculty Learning Community (FLC) and Professional Learning Community (PLC), and Communities of Practice (CoP)

	Faculty Learning Community (FLC) and Professional Learning Community (PLC)	**Community of Practice (CoP)**
	Definition: A PLC is an "environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth" (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, p. xii). Definition: An FLC is a cross-disciplinary faculty group who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program, usually with a specific curriculum, focused on enhancing teaching and learning. The experience includes frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building (Cox, 2004).	Definition: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 2015). To be a CoP, the community must include a practice element, defined as something that is produced over time by those who participate and engage in the process. (Wenger, E., 2010).

Members and Participation	The leadership of a PLC usually defines the membership, and a PLC typically includes people based on their roles, rather than on their organic interest in the domain (Stoll et al., 2006) Topic-based FLCs offer membership to and provide opportunities for learning across all faculty ranks and cohorts, but with a focus on a particular theme (Cox, 2004). Learning community members typically have requirements as an expectation and condition of participation, such as sharing their work across the institution, completing individual projects related to the learning, or completing a reflective analysis of the experience (UC-Davis, 2018). Members are sometimes assigned or required to participate in FLCs or PLCs (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).	Members have expertise or passion for a topic or interest area, and they want to explore it and improve their practice around that topic or interest (Wenger, et al., 2002). Participation is voluntary and often self-selected (Wenger, et al., 2002). Successful CoPs include members who demonstrate a sense of ownership, a commitment to participate in expertise building, and engagement with reflective practices within the self-identified professional areas of improvement (Ianquinto et al., 2011).
Leadership	Provided by a designated leader or facilitator (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004).	Distributed; leadership comes from both formal and informal leaders, within and outside the community (Wenger et al., 2002).
Focus	The community provides a supportive environment where members can engage in various activities and experiment with new approaches to teaching, share successes and challenges, engage in pedagogical projects, and disseminate instructional practices and tools. As the learning community progresses, members will support each other in completing individual projects relating to the theme of the community and their teaching interests and trajectory. (UC-Davis, 2018) While some institutions have set up peer-oriented FLCs/PLCs with teachers only, these communities are always created and sanctioned by the institution's administrative leadership (Bond & Lockee, 2014; Stoll et al., 2006).	Members develop their practice through activities such as joint problem solving, sharing information, discussing developments, sharing challenges, processing solutions, documenting projects, or conducting visits in the teaching and learning space (Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Culture	FLCs are "a way of working with and around the traditional academic culture that tends to be individualized, isolated, and focused only on disciplinary knowledge. This is often a hostile environment for faculty, particularly new instructors, who not only are striving to become good teachers but are embedded in institutions that are increasingly advertising the strength of the learning experience to students, increasing the pressure to excel in teaching" (MacPherson, 2007)	Nurtures a level of trust and relationship building so collaboration and knowledge sharing can occur. Innovation is valued (Wenger et al., 2002).
Knowledge Sharing or Deliverables	Whether FLC members generate individual and personalized deliverables or a single group deliverable, members are responsible for disseminating what the FLC has learned to enhance teaching and learning in broader local, and national, and/or international communities (Cox, 2004).	Occurs mainly within the community, however, there may be exchanges across the community's boundaries when appropriate (Wenger et al., 2002).
Assessment and Overall Effectiveness	FLC participants prepare initial, midyear, and final reports and program assessments about achieving objectives, outcomes, deliverables, and interaction with FLC members and student associates. This also includes SoTL, which involves the evaluation of student learning as a result of a course intervention connected with the FLC topic (Cox, 2004).	Based on formal or informal data collection methods to show who members are changing and improving their practice. Even more important is generating newer or deeper levels of knowledge through the sum of the group activity (Wenger, 2011). An effective CoP includes participants who demonstrate a sense of ownership, a commitment to participate in expertise building, engagement in continuous communication, and engagement with reflective practices that focuses on the self-identified professional areas of improvement (Iaquinto, 2011).
Design	PLCs and FLCs can be cohort or topic based. Cohort-based FLCs address the teaching, learning, and developmental needs of an important cohort of faculty. Topic-based FLCs have a curriculum designed to address a particular faculty or campus teaching and learning issue (Cox, 2004).	The design of the CoP should be organic, with no singular best approach (Tinnell et al., 2019; Cox, 2004). The design should ensure active engagement by the community members that support the community to meet its specific goals (Cox, 2004; Ianquinto et al., 2011).

Visibility of Communities of Practice: A Potential Gap by Institutional Type?

An unexpected challenge is the visibility of existing CoPs across the higher education landscape. Scouring the web for primary, secondary, or organizational resources that include evidence of practice communities is both fruitful and challenging. The landscape scan is productive primarily in identifying a variety of R1 institutions and various 4-year counterparts with detailed website information, primarily through the colleges' centers for teaching and learning, about the institution's community of practice efforts. These institutions include Oregon State University, University of Alabama, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Weber State University, University of California-Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, Portland State University, University of Colorado-Boulder, University of Maine, Boise State University, and the University of Washington.

However, the scan is challenging in the face of less visible and seemingly non-existent information about communities of practice at community college, tribal college, HBCUs, HSIs, AAPISIs, and MSIs, in general. That is not to say the communities of practice do not exist at these institutions, but rather the communication and public conversation about them is not as easily accessible or visible, compared to the four year institutions. This gap and lack of visible identification of CoPs at these institutions might point to a need for a resource repository or open sharing platform, where existing CoPs across multiple institutional types are shared. Some of the community colleges, tribal colleges, HBCUs, HSIs, AAPISIs, and MSIs colleges where communities of practice exist include Valencia College, Clark College, Madison College, East Los Angeles Community College, and Cañada College.

Significance and Importance of Communities of Practice to Organizations

Communities of practice offer short and long-term value for both participants and organizations that support the communities. Through the lens of this value proposition, Wenger et al. (2002) identified why organizations might nurture communities of practice as both a benefit for participants (employees) and the organization as a whole. Figure 2 provides additional detail on the short-term and long-term value:

Table 3
Why Focus on Communities of Practice?

	for members	**for organizations**
short-term value	• help with challenges • access to expertise • confidence • fun with colleagues • meaningful work	• problem solving • time saving • knowledge sharing • synergies across sectors/districts • reuse of resources
long-term value	• personal development • enhanced reputation • professional identity • networking	• strategic capabilities • keeping up-to-date • innovation • retention of talents • new strategies

The value of communities of practice is shared and intertwined between members and the organization and is directly related to the overall success of communities (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). If members do not find value, they will not participate and will not engage. If communities do not create some kind of value for the organization, it may be difficult to gain support, access resources, or influence organizational change.

Through an individual's personal and professional lens, the value of CoPs is high, particularly in developing personal connections, nurturing trust, and committing to a shared sense of purpose. Existing literature suggests that "engaging with a multidisciplinary community of practice can . . . provide more than online educational skills; they foster a sense of togetherness and a safe environment to share concerns and challenges on both a professional and personal level" (Sadiq, 2020, p.134). Multiple benefits to members of CoPs have been identified in the literature (Wenger et al., 2000; Akinyemi et al., 2020), which may translate into organizational benefits as members connect more deeply and closely with the work they do and the organization they do it for. These benefits include:

1. An opportunity to manage and respond to change;
2. Access to new knowledge;
3. Experience fostered communal trust and a shared sense of common purpose through loyalty and commitment among stakeholders;
4. Promotion of professional recognition and expertise among practitioners;
5. An opportunity to improve efficiency of processes.

Similarly, through the institutional or organizational lens, CoPs can benefit the community but are crucial for organizations where knowledge is a key institutional asset. Bracewell et al. (2020) found that the innovation potential for organizations that support CoPs can be pretty high. Wenger (1998b) advocated for multiple communities, a "constellation of interconnected communities of practice, each dealing with specific aspects of the company's competencies" (para 10). These communities nurture a framework where knowledge is created, shared, organized, refined, and transferred within the communities, and in some cases, into other areas of the organization.

Of particular importance to organizations is a set of functions communities of practice fulfill for the formation, collection, utilization, and dissemination of knowledge in an organization or institution Wenger (1998b), including:

- **They are nodes for the exchange and interpretation of information.** Because members have a shared understanding, they know what is relevant to communicate and how to present information in practical ways. Consequently, a community of practice that spreads throughout an organization is an ideal channel for moving information, such as best practices, tips, or feedback, across organizational boundaries (Wenger, 1998b).
- **They can retain knowledge in "living" ways, unlike a database or a manual.** Even when CoPs routinize certain tasks and processes, they can do so in a manner that responds to local circumstances and thus is useful to practitioners. Communities of practice preserve the tacit aspects of knowledge that formal systems cannot capture. For this reason, they are ideal for initiating newcomers into a practice (Wenger, 1998b).
- **They can steward competencies to keep the organization at the cutting edge.** These groups discuss novel ideas, work together on problems, and keep up with developments inside and outside a firm. When a community commits to being on the forefront of a field, members distribute responsibility for keeping up with or pushing new developments. This collaborative inquiry makes membership valuable because people invest their professional identities in being part of a dynamic, forward-looking community (Wenger, 1998b).
- **They provide homes for identities.** They are not as temporary as teams, and, unlike business units, they are organized around what matters to their members. Identity is important because, in a sea of information, it helps us determine what we will pay attention to, what we participate in, and what we choose not to engage in. A sense of identity is a crucial aspect of learning in organizations (Wenger, 1998b).

The literature identifies other benefits and positive outcomes for higher education institutions related to CoPs. For new academic hires, CoPs can help to reduce the isolation that may accompany an emerging professional career (Mercieca, 2016). Wilson et al. (2020) found that junior academics, defined as lecturers and not full professors, were more likely to apply something they had learned in their CoP to their teaching practice, which may affect student success and other college outcomes. The uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic may have increased the value of CoPs even more than in previous pre-pandemic times. Mead et al. (2021) found CoPs encouraged faculty to share promising practices and "co-mentor each other in a way that enabled the resilient adoption and adaptation of promising practices…in the face of unpredictable social and economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic" (p.17).

In summary, communities of practice are fundamentally still similar to how Wegner (1998) defined them: as groups of people who share information, experiences, and practices through collaboration and dialogue in a common area of interest (Wenger, 1998). Within a teaching and learning context, CoPs seek to explore everyday problems, emerging trends, new practices, and complex challenges through a supportive model while focused on improving practices. Communities of practice provide educators and academics with a framework for promoting, facilitating, and nurturing the development and advancement of knowledge. While CoPs present some addressable challenges within the teaching and learning landscape, CoPs can offer individuals and organizations a range of unique benefits.

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