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## INTRODUCING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A community of practice can be characterised as "a group of professionals informally bound to one another through exposure to a common class of problems, common pursuit of solutions, and thereby themselves embodying a store of knowledge" (Hildreth & Kimble, 2000:3).

Communities may therefore be seen as a complementary organisational structure, made out of the personal networks created and used to solve common problems arising from common practice. They are groups of people informally bound by their shared competence and mutual interest in a given practice, which makes it natural for them to share their individual experiences and knowledge in an informal and creative way, through which they are able to foster new perspectives and new ways of tending to arising problems (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

"At the simplest level, they are a small group of people (...) who've worked together over a period of time. Not a team, not a task force, not necessarily an authorised or identified group (...). They are peers in the execution of 'real work'. What holds them together is a common sense of purposes and a real need to know what each other knows" (Brown & Gray, 1995:4).

Members may just experience how their collaboration develops over time through a common understanding of what they do, how they do it, and how their action relates to other communities within the constellation - without them realising what their community actually is (Brown & Duguid, 1998). According to Wenger (1998a) communities of practice define themselves along three dimensions:

- 1) their joint enterprise (what their practice or knowledge domain is about)
- 2) their mutual engagement (how it works and what it is that binds them together), and
- 3) by their shared repertoire (their competence regime, e.g. routines, skills, artefacts, vocabulary, styles etc.).

Whereas, the creation of knowledge and learning within communities of practice, according to Brown & Duguid (1991), will be characterised by three elements:

- Narratives, used for diagnosing problems and as repositories of existing knowledge.
- Collaboration, due to members engaging in, and sharing a common practice.
- Social constructivism, members develop a common understanding of their practice and a common understanding of how to solve problems.

When members in a community engage in a common practice characterised by narratives, collaboration and social constructivism, they enable their community of practice to act "as a locally negotiated regime of competence. Within such a regime, knowledge is no longer undefined. It can be defined as what would be recognised as competent participation in the practice" (Wenger, 1998a:137).

Much of the literature on communities of practice, especially the studies made by Orr (1996), illustrates how organisations actually depend on the complex relationships between groups: relationships that do not formally exist, but which are actually responsible for getting the work of organising done.

It is through these relationships that knowing is validated, shared and evolved, by individuals engaging in the negotiation of meaning, by negotiating and sharing insights, narratives and social constructions both within and among communities.

Within the CoP-community there is an ongoing dispute about communities of practice in organisations; between those focusing on self-organising CoPs, and those who focus on sponsored CoPs (i.e. CoPs initiated, chartered, and supported by management). The debate

evolves around whether it is 'acceptable' to sponsor communities or whether the work of facilitators should concentrate on only sustaining self-organising cops. T

he focus on communities of practice in this thesis is restricted to self-organising CoPs, i.e. communities of practice which have emerged naturally.

Due to my perception of knowledge being embedded in the relationships between individuals and in communities of practice, I prefer viewing the organisation as a hybrid or a constellation of self-organising CoPs.

According to Wenger (1998a: 127) "The term constellation refers to a grouping of stellar objects that are seen as a configuration even though they may not be particularly close to one another, of the same kind, or of the same size. A constellation is a particular way of seeing them as related, one that depends on the perspective one adopts".

Viewing organisations as constellations of communities of practice therefore implies a certain linking of these communities, in order to maintain organisational coherence. This means, that even though knowledge is created within communities, knowledge should not be seen merely as a community property. The communities are part of a larger system, i.e. the organisation, which may then be depicted as a constellation of communities, as a hybrid of overlapping and interdependent communities (Brown & Duguid, 1998).