Communities of Practice: Never Knowingly Undersold

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Abstract. This paper was prompted by the growing ambiguity about what is meant by the term Community of Practice and what such communities are supposed achieve. Like John Lewis' famous tag-line "Never Knowingly Undersold", the term "Communities of Practice" has proved to be both durable and capable of holding many levels of meaning and seems like an appropriate metaphor for the way that the term Communities of Practice is used by some.

This paper will show how the use of the term has changed from the early exploratory works of Lave and Wenger (1991), through the later, more theoretical, works of Wenger (1998a) to the current, more "business friendly", version propounded by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). It will argue that, just as when buying goods from a retailer, when dealing with the Community of Practice, one should also follow the dictum 'let the buyer beware'.

1 Introduction

Communities of Practice are an area of increasing interest for academics, consultants and practitioners. Perhaps this interest is not too surprising: they provide a useful socio-cultural description of the process of the creation and reproduction of knowledge, an account of agency and structure that can be applied to the business environment, as well as a social constructivist theory of learning applicable to groups. However, the very utility and popularity of the term has lead to it being used in a variety of different, and potentially conflicting, ways. This, in turn, has lead to an increasing number of articles that are critical of the way in which the term is used.

For example, in an earlier paper (Kimble & Hildreth, 2004) we questioned the applicability of the concept both to the modern business world in general, and to the virtual world of distributed working in particular. Similarly Cox (2005) offers a critical review of four different interpretations of Communities of Practice from the viewpoint of a management ideology while Roberts (2006) examines the limits of the usefulness of the concept and identifies the different ways in which it is used by management academics. This paper will continue that debate by examining the evolution of the concept of Communities of Practice during three key periods of its development.

The body of the paper is taken up with a review of literature on Communities of Practice. It begins by considering, principally, the two works from 1991 that first introduced the term: "Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and "Organizational Learning And Communities of Practice" (Brown

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& Duguid, 1991). This is followed by an examination of Wenger's later work centred around "Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity" (Wenger, 1998a) and concludes with some of the more recent 'consultancy based' work of Wenger such as "Cultivating Communities of Practice" (Wenger et al., 2002).

Following the lead of Cox (2005) and Roberts (2006) this takes an analytical approach to the literature and provides, for each period:

1. Some background to the period under examination. Here the aim is to place this particular view of Communities of Practice in its historical context.
2. An analysis of the way in which the term is used. Essentially we ask 'what is a Community of Practice, what does it do and how does it work?'
3. A summary of the key features of the view of Communities of Practice from this particular period.

The concluding section of the paper will offer some general observations on the way in which the usage of the term in the literature has changed and some advice to reader of that literature.

2 Never Knowingly Undersold

The claim "Never Knowingly Undersold" is one that has been used continuously since 1925 by the John Lewis Partnership, a chain of upmarket department stores in the UK. Essentially, it states that if a customer can buy the same item cheaper elsewhere, John Lewis will refund the difference.

The phrase "Never Knowingly Undersold" has been in constant use for over 80 years and has proved a durable and eye-catching headline, however, the claim is not quite so straight forward as it seems. The comparison must be with *exactly* the same product (brand, model, colour, size etc) which both John Lewis' and the competitor must hold in stock. Crucially for the 21st century world of retailing, the guarantee does not apply to web based companies and, more subtly, the type of goods offered by the John Lewis Partnership tend to be 'top of the range' goods with specialist service contracts so that the number of valid comparisons a customer can make is somewhat limited.

Notwithstanding this, the phrase "Never Knowingly Undersold" has been emulated by countless other businesses. Perhaps one explanation for this success is that it seems to signify certain desirable qualities (e.g. a guaranteed 'best buy' from an upmarket store) even when, on closer inspection, this is not all that it seems.

Some critical reviews have suggested that the term Communities of Practice shares similar properties to this slogan. For example, Fox (2000) suggests that viewing an organization as a community of practice can help deflect attention away from more contentious issues because, as Liedtka (1999) notes:

> *"... to see a business organization as a community of practice is to see it as held together by a shared concern for both the outcomes it achieves for stakeholders (be they customers or shareholders) and the personal development and learning of its members" (Liedtka, 1999, p 7)*

Similarly, Gherardi, Nicolini and Odella (1998) note that the 'positive, virtuous and consensual overtones' of the term can mask the tensions inherent in interactive social

learning. Although, this consensual view of shared goals and shared concerns, which occurs more often in the later literature, is not necessarily wrong, it is in conflict with some of the early views, as Henriksson (2000) points out:

> *"Quite contrary to their intentions, the metaphor* [of community] *downplays the very dynamic tensions, struggles and pluralism that Lave and Wenger in their original book seemed to wish to convey." (Henriksson, 2000, p 10)*

While such disparities may not be a problem to (for example) consultants trying to sell their expertise, they are much more fundamental to the work of the academic and it is these subtle distinctions of meaning that this paper sets out to explore.

3 The Early Period (1991 – 1995)

3.1 Historical Context

Many of the current notions of Communities of Practice first originated in the late 1980s in the Work Practice and Technology group at the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL) at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Centre (PARC). The research in IRL at PARC brought together ideas from several different academic disciplines and occupational backgrounds and consisted of an interdisciplinary group of researchers that included Lucy Suchman, Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger, John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid.

For many years, what were termed Behaviourist Models of learning had been dominant. These held that learning was principally concerned with the process of transmission of knowledge from teacher to learner; essentially, knowledge was viewed as an object that could simply be "transferred" from one person to another. However, during the 1970s and 1980s there began to be an increasing interest in what were called Social Constructivist models of learning. These saw learning not as a process of transmission of knowledge from one individual to another, but as a process in which knowledge was mutually "co-constructed". Much of the conceptual basis for these theories were founded on the work of Vygotsky (1978) who was concerned with the ways in which individuals learn within communities. Vygotsky believed that knowledge was socially constructed through collaboration and interaction in activities and used the notion of a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to describe the way in which a learner interacts with others in a particular activity.

The two key texts that we will consider from this period were both published in 1991. The first, by Lave and Wenger (1991), is "Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation"; the second by John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid is "Organizational Learning and Community of Practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning, and innovation" (1991). Both of these works have much in common and share much of the same source material (e.g. (Cain, Unpublished), (Marsall, 1972), (Lave, 1988), (Jordan, 1989), (Orr, 1990b) and (E Hutchins, 1991)) and although they both approach Communities of Practice in slightly different ways, they are both primarily concerned with theories of learning.

3.2 Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation

The focus of the book is on informal learning in social situations; the book mainly drew on previously conducted studies of Liberian tailors, Mayan midwives, non-drinking alcoholics, butchers in supermarkets and navy quartermasters.

3.2.1 What is a Community of Practice?

The main objective of Lave and Wenger's work was to explore an alternative theory of learning to that of the dominant behaviourist models. At this point, they were content to leave the definition of a Community of Practice as a largely intuitive notion (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 26) considering the value of their description of a Community of Practice to be primarily as a heuristic device that could highlight issues that had previously been overlooked. One the most frequently cited definitions of a Community of Practice comes from this work and describes a Community of Practice as:

> *"... a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping Communities of Practice." (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p98)*

It continues

> *"A Community of Practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the intrinsic support necessary for making sense of its heritage ... the social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning." (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 98)*

3.2.2 What does it do?

Lave and Wenger (1991) were primarily concerned with situated learning, and their notion of a Community of Practice is closely related to this. It is largely based on the idea of learning through apprenticeship. A Community of Practice is seen as a mechanism for the reproduction of existing knowledge through active engagement with others in some form of 'practice'. Viewed in this way, learning is essentially the process of socialisation into a community.

Over time, the knowledge that is acquired in these communities begins to constitute both a sense of identity of oneself (as a member of that community) and becomes part of one's identity in the eyes of the others. Consequently learning becomes part of *"... generative social practice in the lived in world"* (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 35).

Lave and Wenger call this complex reciprocal interrelationship between the practice and participation "mutually constitutive" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 117). Such communities are described as "enacted", that is that members can be thought of as 'performing' or 'improvising' their roles in the community as they go about their everyday activities (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

3.2.3 How does it work?

Lave and Wenger use the concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) to describe the underlying process of how this division of labour and responsibility is achieved.

> *"Legitimate Peripheral Participation provides a way to speak about relations between newcomers and old timers and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 29)*

By connecting participation and meaning, Lave and Wenger take Communities of Practice beyond a simple forum for learning and link membership of a Community of Practice to aspects of the members' social identity. Based on Cain's observations (Cain, Unpublished) of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings Lave and Wenger (1991, pp 79 - 84) illustrate many of the aspects of how LPP allows a Community of Practice to function.

In an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, members tell stories that are a means of reinterpreting the past, understanding the present and visualising the future in terms of an alcoholic's identity, the ultimate goal being to conceive of oneself as a non-drinking alcoholic. Stories are told, retold and elaborated as the novice moves from peripheral to full participation in the community.

3.3 Organizational Learning and Communities of Practice

Brown and Duguid's (1991) discussion of Communities of Practice is mostly based on Orr's ethnographic studies of service technicians in Xerox (Orr, 1987, 1990a, 1990b). As the full title implies, the goal is to bring together theories of working, learning and innovation in order to provide new insights into organizational learning and the role of communities in the workplace.

3.3.1 What is a Community of Practice?

The starting point for Brown and Duguid's (1991) discussion of Communities of Practice is the difference between the way an organization describes a person's work and the way the work is actually carried out in practice. The former they describe as "canonical practice" and the latter as "non-canonical practice". Their aim is to show how, when canonical accounts of work break down, Communities of Practice continue to get by through improvising new solutions.

They describe Communities of Practice as interstitial communities that exist in the 'gaps' between work as defined, and the tasks that need to be done. They use the term to describe groups that are (a) fluid and dynamic *"... constantly adapting to changing membership and changing circumstances"* (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p 41); *(b)* emergent *"That is to say their shape and membership emerges in the process of activity, as opposed to being created to carry out a task "* (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p 49) and most crucially (c) exists, *"... outside the organization's limited core world view"* (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p 51).

3.3.2 What does it do?

Brown and Duguid argue that most organizations believe (or wish to believe) that complex tasks can be mapped onto a simple canonical 'map' that workers can follow without the need for either understanding or insight.

> *"Through a reliance on canonical descriptions (to the extent of overlooking even their own non-canonical improvisations), managers*

> *develop a conceptual outlook that cannot comprehend the importance of non-canonical practices." (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p 42)*

They argue that the reality of the technician's work is far more complicated and is as much about maintaining social relations with their customers and peers as it is about machines; consequently,

> *"... the reps must - and do - learn to make better sense of the machines they work with than their employer either expects or allows." (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p 43)*

Thus, in addition to the maintaining social relations, Communities of Practice also serve:

> *"... to protect the organization from its own shortsightedness" (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p 43)*

3.3.3 How does it work?

Brown and Duguid acknowledge the role of LPP in fostering learning (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p 48) but highlight three overlapping categories of their own - "narration", "collaboration" and "social construction" - which they claim get to the heart of the way these communities work.

Narration reflects the complex social web within which work takes place: stories have a flexibility that makes them both adaptable and particular. Collaboration is based on the exchange and elaboration of shared narratives, both across the organization and within communities. Finally, turning to Social Construction, Brown and Duguid comment:

> *"Simultaneously and interdependently, the reps are contributing to the construction and evolution of the community that they are joining what we might call a "community of interpretation", for it is through the continual development of these communities that the shared means for interpreting complex activity get formed, transformed, and transmitted." (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p 47)*

The collaborative telling and re-telling of stories contributes both to the construction of a technicians' own identity, and reciprocally to the construction and development of the community in which they work.

3.4 The Concept of a Community of Practice in the Early Period

Although there are some obvious differences in the focus of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Brown and Duguid (1991) both agree about what sort of group Community of Practice is and why they exist. For both sets of authors, Communities of Practice are seen as being primarily concerned with learning and Communities of Practice are seen as autonomous groups

Given the context from which the idea of Communities of Practice emerged, it is perhaps not too surprising that there is such a clear focus on learning. Although the precise mechanism by which this learning takes place is not always clear, the general

thrust of the argument is that knowledge is not an abstract, immutable object that can be passed from one person to another but is situated, mutable and socially constituted. The process of learning is seen as one that is ongoing; over time, meanings are contested, negotiated and re-negotiated through participation, both in the community and in the practice. The learning that takes place is based on a particular activity performed in a particular community; consequently, what is learnt in that community might only be seen as being valid within that community.

Perhaps less obvious is the degree to which both see Communities of Practice as essentially 'autonomous groups'. Both see Communities of Practice as being outside the 'formal' organization: Brown and Duguid (1991) deal with interstitial communities while Lave and Wenger (1991) focus on learning outside of the formal constraints of the classroom; but beyond that both see them as being somehow self generating and existing primarily for the benefit of their members. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe how

> *"... agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 33)*

while Brown and Duguid (1991) use Daft and Weick's (1984) notion of "enactment" to describe how:

> *"... their shape and membership emerges in the process of activity, as opposed to being created to carry out a task" (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p 49).*

For both, Communities of Practice are seen as being 'wild' or 'untamed' in the sense that one might view a wild animal: they exist independently of the formalised world of organizations and are driven by their own internal needs.

4 The Middle Period (1996 – 1999)

4.2 Historical Context

The area of key concern in the earlier papers was what was seen as outmoded and inappropriate models of learning. The underlying theme for this next period in Community of Practice literature is the pre-millennium sense of optimism that the economy and perhaps society in general, was undergoing a fundamental shift. For at least 30 years, authors such as, McLuhan (1964, 1989), Ellul (1964), Toffler (1972, 1980) Bell (1974) and (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978) had been predicting radical social change driven by technological change and for some things finally seemed to have reached a tipping point in the 1990s.

For a variety of reasons, the 1990s were a period when Big Business was looking for Big Ideas. Probably the most obvious manifestation of this was the "dot-com fever" of the late 1990s when stock market speculation and hype inflated the value of small hi-tech start-up companies (known colloquially as dot-com companies), to astronomical levels. The NASDAQ Composite index, which traded heavily in such companies, increased by more than 500% between 1994 and 2000 and many executives and employees of such companies, who were partly paid in stock options, became instant millionaires.

One of the readily identifiable "Big Ideas" of the period was "Knowledge Management". Prusak (2001) states that the term was first used in early 1993 although others argue that it was first used in the Journal 'Public Administration Review' as long ago as 1975, (e.g. Goerl, 1975). Whatever the truth is, it is clear from studies of bibliographic data such as Serenko and Bontis (2004) and Ponzi and Koenig (2002) that widespread interest in knowledge management did not really begin to grow until the mid 1990s. As Hildreth, Wright and Kimble (1999) point out, much of this interest was fuelled by globalisation, downsizing and outsourcing, each of which has implications for the rate at which organizations lose knowledge and the efficiency with which they can manage existing knowledge.

It is against this background that the works of the middle period should be considered. All of the works from this period have Wenger as the sole author and cover the period between his earlier collaboration with Lave and his later collaboration with Snyder and McDermott. The principle work we will consider here is Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity (Wenger, 1998a).

4.3 Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity

In the opening pages of this book Wenger makes it clear that he is keen to establish the intellectual foundations of his work (Wenger, 1998a, p 11). The source material for the book is drawn from an ethnographic study of clerks in a medical insurance claims processing office. In this book, Wenger elaborates some of the terms from his earlier work (e.g. identity and participation), abandons others (e.g. LPP) and introduces some new ideas (e.g. dualities).

4.3.1 What is a Community of Practice?

In contrast to his earlier, more 'intuitive' definitions of a Community of Practice, Wenger now provides a much more concise definition of a Community of Practice that consists of just three interrelated terms: "joint enterprise", "mutual engagement" and "shared repertoire" (Wenger, 1998a, p 72 - 73). Here Wenger is much more concerned with Communities of Practice in the context of a formal organization:

> *"Communities of Practice are ... a different cut on the organization's structure - one that emphasizes the learning that people have done together rather than the unit they report to, the project they are working on, or the people they know." (Wenger, 1998b)*

In essence, Wenger now argues that Communities of Practice arise out of a need to accomplish particular tasks although, as before he continues to view them as self-directed and self-organizing systems.

> *"Communities of Practice ... reflect the members' own understanding of what is important. Obviously, outside constraints or directives can influence this understanding, but even then, members develop practices that are their own response to these external influences. Even when a community's actions conform to an external mandate, it is the community - not the mandate- that produces the practice" (Wenger, 1998b).*

4.3.2 What does it do?

A Community of Practice is a forum where learning, meaning and identity are negotiated; it is through practice in particular that we experience the world in a meaningful way, as practice "*gives structure and meaning to what we do"* (Wenger, 1998a, p 47).

Wenger's (1998a) view of a Community of Practice shares many similarities to Brown and Duguid's (1991). He sees part of the role of a Community of Practice being to make work habitable.

> *"a significant amount of the processors' communal energy goes into making their time at work a liveable realization of their marginality within the corporation and the insurance industry" (Wenger, 1998a, p 171).*

Similarly, he argues that they can contribute to the 'host' organization, although in contrast to Brown and Duguid (1991), the contribution is phrased in "Knowledge Management" terms:

> *"Communities of Practice are important to the functioning of any organization, but they become crucial to those that recognize knowledge as a key asset ... Knowledge is created, shared, organized, revised, and passed on within and among these communities." (Wenger, 1998b)*

Finally, like Brown and Duguid's (1991) "collective of communities", Wenger (1998a, p 127) views the organization as a "constellation of communities".

4.3.3 How does it work?

Unlike his earlier collaboration with Lave (Lave & Wenger, 1991), LPP no longer features in the explanation of how Communities of Practice function, now Wenger argues that all of the activities in a Community of Practice can be described in terms of the interplay of four fundamental dualities which he describes as:

> *"... a single conceptual unit that is formed by two inseparable and mutually constitutive elements, whose inherent tensions and complementarity give the concept richness and dynamism" (Wenger, 1998a, p 66)*

The four dualities Wenger identifies are participation-reification, designed-emergent, identification-negotiability and local-global, although the participation-reification duality, with its strong connection to Knowledge Management, that has been the focus of particular interest. Wenger argues that Communities of Practice can contribute to the knowledge assets of an organization both through the knowledge they develop at their core, and through the interactions at their boundaries. It is participation that plays a crucial role in the creation of knowledge in the core while reification has a particular importance for interactions at the boundaries of the community.

4.4 The Concept of a Community of Practice in the Middle Period

In line with Wenger's stated aim of establishing an intellectual foundation for his work, some of the vagueness of the earlier descriptions has been removed and the ideas behind a Community of Practice are generally presented in a more direct and analytical way. However, in many ways Wenger (1998a) bears some striking similarities to Brown and Duguid (1991).

While informal learning in social groups is still an important feature, it is now only considered in the context of formal organizational settings. All of the examples are taken from the workplace. Like Brown and Duguid (1991), the wider organization is viewed as consisting of a collection of inter-related communities and like Brown and Duguid (1991), Wenger (1998a) appears to view Communities of Practice as acting both as support systems for employees whilst simultaneously providing a benefit to the organization that contains them. Essentially this represents a move away from viewing Communities of Practice as a way of gaining insight into social leaning towards viewing Communities of Practice as a means of problem solving and sense-making within an organization.

The nature of a Community of Practice has also changed in another way. In the earlier works, there was little or no consideration of the world outside the community. Wenger (1998a) however is more explicitly concerned with this topic, particularly through his notion of reification. Similarly, by the use of the notion of a "constellation of communities" and by stressing the value that Communities of Practice can bring to an organization, Wenger links what happens inside the Community to the wider social context within which it is embedded.

Finally, while it is still clear that Wenger sees Communities of Practice as being emergent, he suggest that Communities of Practice can be 'guided' or 'nurtured' in some way, for example.

> *"They self-organize, but they flourish when their learning fits with their organizational environment. The art is to help such communities find resources and connections without overwhelming them with organizational meddling." (Wenger, 1998b)*

However much of this comment concerns the role of internal leadership rather than external strategic interventions. This represents a shift from the previous view of "wild" Communities of Practice toward something that can be 'nurtured', but nonetheless, the view remains that Communities of Practice are essentially 'untamed'.

5 The Late Period (2000 – 2003)

5.2 Historical Context

Ponzi and Koenig (2002) in their article "Knowledge Management: Another Management Fad?" describe the way in which "fads" in the academic literature emerge quickly, are adopted with great zeal, then rapidly decline. They ascribe this behaviour to the way in which certain groups (consulting firms, 'management gurus', mass media, business schools, etc) initially proselytize on behalf of a particular technique only to drop it later when it becomes unfashionable. They describe how Quality Circles, Total Quality Management and Business Process Reengineering have

all followed this pattern and how Knowledge Management looks destined to follow them. It is against this idea of fads and fashions in management literature that we should consider the literature in this final section of the paper.

The preface to Cultivating Communities of Practice (Wenger et al., 2002) provides a clear illustration of the how the author's viewed the situation before the book was written. In an echo of Davenport's (1996) description of the growth of Business Process Reengineering they write how when they first met it seemed like *"the planets ... were aligned"*. All three were active management consultants and *"interest in Communities of Practice was exploding"*, for the authors it seemed that their book was destined *"... to provide a common foundation for this spreading movement"* (Wenger et al., 2002, p x).

However, within a few years it seemed the situation had changed. McDermott was writing articles entitled "How to avoid a mid life crisis in your CoPs" (McDermott, 2004) and a new wave of articles critical of the whole CoP approach were beginning to appear. Ponzi and Koenig (2002) indicate that the only real difference between a fashion and a fad is that fashions briefly show signs of maturity before declining. It is argued that these later works can be interpreted as attempts to demonstrate the 'maturity' of the CoP concept to delay the inevitable decline that must follow the initial evangelical zeal of the recent convert.

5.3 Cultivating Communities of Practice

The main work we examine here is Cultivating Communities of Practice (Wenger et al., 2002) however we will also include a number of later works, such as (Wenger, 2000), (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), (Snyder *et al.*, 2003), (Snyder & Briggs, 2003), (McDermott, 2004) and (Wenger *et al.*, 2005), which illustrate more clearly the way in which the focus of the Communities of Practice literature has changed during this period.

5.3.1 What is a Community of Practice?

Unlike his earlier book, this is not a theoretical work but is aimed specifically at practitioners; consequently, the majority of the book is given over to tips on how to cultivate Communities of Practice rather than an analysis of them. Thus Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) simply state that although Communities of Practice can take many forms

> *"... they all share a basic structure ... a unique combination of three fundamental elements" (Wenger et al., 2002, p 27)*

Which are a domain of knowledge, a notion of community and a practice. In later a work, Wenger and Snyder describe Communities of Practice as:

> *"... groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise* [which can] *drive strategy, generate new lines of business, solve problems, promote the spread of best practices, develop professional skills, and help companies to recruit and retain talent" (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, pp 139 - 140)*

while, Snyder and Briggs state that:

> *"Communities of practice steward the knowledge assets of organizations and society. They operate as "social learning systems" where practitioners connect to solve problems, share ideas, set standards, build tools, and develop relationships with peers and stakeholders." (Snyder & Briggs, 2003, p 7)*

5.3.2 What does it do?

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder state that they will concentrate on *"... the ability of Communities of Practice to steward knowledge inside organizations"* (Wenger et al., 2002, p 219). There is a similarly emphasis in all of the literature from this period on the role that Communities of Practice can play in Knowledge Management, for example Snyder, Wenger and Biggs (2003) argue that Communities of Practice *"... complement formal units and help organizations weave critical connections across formal groups to leverage knowledge for performance"* (Snyder et al., 2003). However, it is also clear that there is now a far grander plan for CoPs. The preface to the book states that:

> *"We share a vision that Communities of Practice will help shape society [and] provide new points of stability and connection in an increasingly mobile, global and changing world" (Wenger et al., 2002, p xii)*

The final chapter of the book lays out that shared vision:

> *"The principles that apply to our businesses ... also apply to the challenges faced by our society. The socioeconomic requirements for sustained prosperity ... demand that we apply these principles beyond the private sector." (Wenger et al., 2002, p 224)*

In similar style, Snyder & Briggs (2003) tackle the role that Communities of Practice could play in government, reducing "red tape" by cutting across bureaucracies that are *"... designed to solve stable problems for established constituencies through centrally managed programs"* (Snyder & Briggs, 2003, p 4).

5.3.3 How does it work?

The issue of how a Community of Practice functions is not really dealt with in this book or the related literature: it is mostly taken as given that Communities of Practice can achieve what the authors claim. However, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) do offer a variation of the five stages of development identified in (Wenger, 1998a), and describe a five stage 'life cycle' for CoPs.

Although the authors state that their model should not be taken too literally, there is no mistaking the inevitable sense of progression. Each stage addresses a particular issue that is described as *"... a tension between two opposing tendencies that the community must address before it can move on to the next stage"* (Wenger et al., 2002, p 69), and at each stage the authors offer a convenient range of strategies that can be deployed to achieve this.

5.4 The Concept of a Community of Practice in the Late Period

The concept of a Community of Practice in the late period represents a profound move away from earlier notions of Communities of Practice. Vann and Bowker

(2001) describe this as the commercialisation or commodification of the concept although Cox sums up the transformation more succinctly as

> *"The reinvention of Communities of Practice as a managerialist concept" (Cox, 2005, p 534)*

This is represents a major change in the way in which the term Community of Practice is understood. Firstly, Communities of Practice have now become manageable and unambiguously of benefit to the organizations that take the effort to do so. Although most of the literature from this period warns of the difficulty of managing Communities of Practice and some warns that Communities of Practice cannot be mandated, there is near universal agreement that, given the right degree of insight, skill and leadership, Communities of Practice can be made to deliver. As Wenger and Snyder put it *"These tasks of cultivation aren't easy, but the harvest they yield makes them well worth the effort"* (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p 140).

Secondly, Communities of Practice are now directly linked the 'management' of knowledge, although there are few direct references to the term Knowledge Management. Instead, the term most often used is "stewarding" knowledge. Exactly what is meant by "stewarding" is never defined. The implication seems to be that Communities of Practice will act as "custodians" or "guardians" of knowledge on behalf of their host organization; thus, simultaneously avoiding any notion of the communities actually owning the knowledge and avoiding the use of the now slightly passé term Knowledge Management.

Finally, there is an explicit view that Communities of Practice can be geographically distributed and can even benefit from having a technological infrastructure to support their activities (e.g. Wenger et al., 2005). This is a significant change from the earlier works where the topic was hardly mentioned. Although, like the difficulty of 'managing' communities, creating effective distributed Communities of Practice is not claimed to be easy, it is now seen as possible and even desirable for distributed communities of several hundred members to exist.

Communities of Practice have become CoPs and CoPs have become a means to an end - CoPs are now not only 'cultivated' but have also been tamed.

6 The Changing Concept of a Community of Practice

Since the term was first coined in 1991, it has undergone a number of significant changes. It is also clear that the final period of literature represents the most profound shift in the way that the concept of a Community of Practice is used.

"Communities of Practice" have undergone a transition from being a heuristic device to a theory and from a theory to an application. At first sight, this might appear to be perfectly natural, as this path is one often followed in the natural sciences - hypotheses are generated, a theory is developed and later the theory is applied. However, in this case, there not linear progression but a dislocation between the theory developed in the early work and that which is applied later.

In the early work Communities of Practice were seen as being, to borrow a metaphor from Hutchins (1996), "in the wild" in the sense that they existed outside

the systematised, planned and well ordered word of the formal organization. However, in the later works the metaphors that are used are those of "cultivation" and "harvesting": Communities of Practice have simply become a tool that can be used to produce a particular outcome; much of the early theory concerning emergence, enactment and the ambiguous nature of the relationship between community and host organization has been lost.

This is more than a semantic nicety or an indication that the concept that has reached maturity; it is a radical departure from the way in which the concept was previously used. In the work from the middle period, Wenger used the notion of reification to explain how the ideas and values of a Community of Practice could achieve independent existence; here in the later works the notion of a Community of Practice seems to have achieved an existence independent of the theory that created it.

Although these changes have been a radical, this in itself need not be a problem. The whole raison d'être of concepts is that we use them as templates to structure and make sense of the world around us, and as the world changes, so must the concepts we use. There is nothing fixed about the way in which we use concepts, as Mutch (2003) notes:

> *"... we can use familiar concepts in new ways, or take concepts from one context to another and play with them"*

However, to quote Mutch again, as academics we must also

> *"... pay careful attention to our sources, making sure that we give due care to the consequences that the use of a concept brings with it"*.

In highlighting this latter approach Mutch (2003) notes that it brings with it the risk of textual exegesis, dogmatism and the unthinking adherence to the received word. It is not my objective to engage in *"textual exegesis"*, nor to be excessively dogmatic about the way in which the term ought to be used, but simply to highlight some of the different ways in which it can be used and draw attention to the potential this has for misconceptions and confusion.

The literature on Communities of Practice is used in pedagogy and in educational theory, e.g. (Barab *et al.*, 2004; Janson *et al.*, 2004; Schwier *et al.*, 2004); what has come to be called "CoP Theory" offers useful insights into both Knowledge Management and Distributed Working, e.g. (Janson et al., 2004; Papargyris & Poulymenakou, 2003; Schwen & Hara, 2003) and what might be called the "community" is used in areas such as Computer Supported Co-operative Work e.g. (Sharratt & Usoro, 2003; Trier, 2005; Zacklad, 2003) and Distributed Team Working e.g. (Kindberg *et al.*, 1999; Pemberton-Billing *et al.*, 2003).

So, should we simply reject large slices of this work because it is based on a 'wrong' interpretation of the theory? The answer to this is almost certainly 'No'. However, lack of attention to the context in which the term was originally used can create contradictions without meaning to by, for example, conflating a theoretical account of a Community of Practice based on LPP with another based on the notion of dualities. We began this paper with a suggestion that the marketing tag-line "Never Knowingly Undersold" and the term "Communities of Practice" had certain similarities and that sometimes, the term Community of Practice did not mean what it might at first be thought to mean. Finally, at the end of the paper we turn again to our

original 'sales' metaphor and urge the reader to follow the advice 'caveat emptor' (or more accurately caveat lector) when dealing with this term in the literature.

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