
Book Review

Communities of Practice Within and Across Organizations: A Guidebook (2nd edition).

Etienne Wenger-Trayner, Beverly Wenger-Trayner, Phil Reid, & Claude Bruderlein, Social Learning Lab (2023) (253 pages). ISBN: 978-989-53290-5-2 (downloadable PDF), ISBN: 978-989-53290-6-9 (printed version) Printed version: \$34.26 (7,170 yen) Downloadable PDF: Free

Reviewed by Julia Kimura

*Mukogawa Women's University School of Pharmacy and
Pharmaceutical Sciences*

While conducting my doctoral research on non-Japanese women in a professional organization in western Japan, an instructor in the program suggested that I consider applying communities of practice (CoP). The framework was well-suited for my goal of using a qualitative approach to explore these women's participation in the organization and identify factors that encouraged it. It helped me to trace members' participation as it moved from the periphery to more central leadership roles and allowed me to identify factors that fostered and prevented women from participating in the solidarity movement. Since the days of its initial inception, Wenger and Snyder (2020) have refined the concept and described CoP as a social theory of learning in which the community comprises a group of people bound by shared expertise working together on a joint enterprise. In the new edition of their guidebook *Communities of Practice Within and Across*

Organizations, the authors now simply describe a CoP as a group of “people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor” (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p. 11).

The authors have organized the guidebook into eight chapters. The first chapter provides a clear and simple explanation of CoPs. Chapter 2 considers the organization, whether it is feasible to develop a CoP, and if so, how to go about doing so. Chapter 3 gets to the heart of the matter and explains how to cultivate a CoP. Chapters 4 and 5 explain how to facilitate the activities of a CoP and how to incorporate technology. Chapter 6 describes how to evaluate the CoP, particularly the value it generates, which manifests outside the community, according to the authors. Chapters 7 and 8 comprise the epilogue and references, as well as a reading list. The guidebook was written by interweaving what the authors described as three separate stories. Still, it can probably be more accurately described as three threads: both Wenger-Trayners describe CoPs broadly, Reid describes the evolution of a CoP in a large American bank, and Bruderlein describes the birth and subsequent growth of a CoP in a humanitarian organization that deals with negotiations. According to the authors, the guidebook can be read in a number of different ways. Naturally, the reader can enjoy the guidebook by reading it cover to cover. Alternatively, the reader can focus on following the story of the CoP in the bank or in the humanitarian organization. The reader can easily enjoy these two stories in an easy-to-follow manner because the stories are demarcated by colored boxes, separate from the main thread of the story by the Wenger-Trayners.

Chapter 4, “Facilitating Meetings and Activities,” will be of particular interest to readers who conduct research. This chapter is interesting because, though it is a part of the guidebook on cultivating CoPs, it is easy to follow as the discussion moves from abstract theory to concrete examples. Specifically, before starting a discussion on facilitating, the authors begin by locating facilitation in the context of tacit learning theories, specifically, social learning design and learning theory. Similarly, in *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge—Seven Principles for Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Wenger et al., 2002), the authors addressed the use of technology for communication

among members in a community spread across time zones. This new edition of *Communities of Practice Within and Across Organizations* naturally adds an updated post-COVID discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of technologies such as online chats, online meetings, and hybrid meetings.

Following the vein of incorporating technology, Chapter 5: “Technology” will also be of particular interest to readers who have been adapting to post-pandemic life. The authors begin the chapter with a caveat that merely leveraging only online tools in order to foster a CoP is not enough. Online tools might sometimes create a distraction from doing the work of growing a CoP or working on the CoP’s enterprise. One example that the authors cite is that leaders of the community might complain that members do not interact with each other between meetings. People are busy and might see asynchronous interactions between meetings as mere busywork. In addition, excess online interaction might create “noise” and draw community members’ attention from priority tasks necessary for the enterprise.

The guidebook is contemporary enough, though it addresses more obvious but less relevant issues that do not significantly affect instructors and students in the same time zone, such as in the EFL context here in Japan. However, the authors adequately address asynchronous interactions and online and hybrid meetings, which educators may have participated in at one time or another since the 2020 academic year. Specifically, as many readers have learned, it is important to consider lighting and audio quality, which the authors remind us is particularly important when communicating in a second language. Secondly, though hybrid meetings have drawbacks, the authors suggest that one way to mitigate a lack of participation by online participants is to invite them to take the lead from time to time.

The guidebook is appealing for three main reasons. First, tables and color illustrations make concepts easier to understand. For example, an illustration shows how a CoP is an ongoing learning loop, fostering a virtuous cycle. In addition, Figure 1.1 on p. 12 illustrates what the three elements of a CoP are and how they fit together. A second appeal is that the authors compare a CoP to other similar structures, such as a team or task force. One key characteristic of a

CoP is that its members tend to have a broad and long-term view. A third appeal is that the vignettes weaved throughout the book serve as real-world examples of CoP, which makes the framework easier to understand and relatable.

This guidebook can benefit teachers and researchers in the following three ways. First, teachers could use this book with a class of highly proficient English users as a coursebook on CoPs and qualitative research methodologies, probably in a graduate program. In addition, the book is also of interest to researchers because the book explains how learning in a CoP occurs in an easy-to-understand manner thanks to real-world examples. Finally, while technology is playing an even more prominent role in foreign language education, the authors remind the reader that an online space does not create the community, but rather, that community building is social—technology alone is not the answer. Therefore, the discussion of technology provides a reality check and encourages the reader to consider carefully what exactly technology can and cannot do for the CoP.

Although there are noticeable improvements from the first edition, such as the addition of an appendix that includes additional stories illustrating the numerous ways in which a CoP can be cultivated, a few problems remain unaddressed. Like several other books I have read recently, there is no index. The lack of an index serves no problem to those who read the PDF version of the book because it is easy to use software to search for specific terms; however, searching for terms and concepts is burdensome for those who prefer to read the hard copy. Furthermore, just as in Wenger's foray into the business world with *A Guide to Managing Knowledge: Cultivating Communities of Practice* (2002), the authors describe fostering a CoP in an organizational context, particularly in a business, which feels contrived. Ideally, a CoP will grow on its own organically, rather than be imposed by management on a group of workers.

Different readers will have various motives for reading this guidebook. Readers looking for an interesting read on the theory of learning and want to enjoy the book cover to cover will find the PDF version easy to use. However, the reader who simply wants to understand the key related concepts might be satisfied with the free PDF version, which can be downloaded from the authors' website and searched quickly with commonly used PDF viewing

software. Alternatively, if the reader prefers reading hard copies of books, they can purchase it from the same website. Considering the vast difference in price between the PDF version and the hard copy, however, it is difficult to justify spending 7,170 yen. Overall, the Wenger-Trayners' latest book is engaging and, thanks to the real-life vignettes, easy to understand because of the wide range of contexts to which they apply CoP. The manual is also easy to understand, thanks to the straightforward structure and helpful visual aids. This accessibility makes this an essential resource book for educators and researchers interested in understanding how people learn together through shared interests.

References

- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. M. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge—Seven principles for cultivating communities of practice*. Harvard Business School.
- Wenger-Trayner, W., Wenger-Trayner, B. Reid, P., & Bruderlein, C. (2023). *Communities of practice within and across organizations: A guidebook* (2nd edition). Social Learning Lab. <https://www.wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/24-02-21-CoP-guidebook-second-edition-final-2.pdf>

Author bio

Julia Kimura earned her PhD from Temple University and is an associate professor in the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at Mukogawa Women's University. She is a proud JALT member and served as Director of Membership for 2023-24 and has been elected to serve a second two-year term. jkimura@mukogawa-u.ac.jp

Received: September 12, 2024

Accepted: January 8, 2025