Communities of practice

Some ideas

Communities of practice were discussed first by Lave & Wenger (1998) from models of situated learning: "Their model of situated learning proposed that learning involved a process of engagement in a community of practice" (Smith, 2003).

The general discussion about CoPs says that:
- they are everywhere
- they can be formal or informal
- they involve changing relationships a participant may be in the periphery then move to the centre and vice versa
- they involve theory AND practice (praxis)
- the participants develop a shared language
- participants engage in mutual sense making
- can grow spontaneously
- can cross organisational/geographical/interest boundaries
- stimulate learning
- generate new knowledge
- purpose is paramount
- depend on a culture of inquiry
- need to emphasise the positive and the things already learned

Wenger (1998) says that there are three dimensions to a community of practice:
- What it is about
- How it functions
- What capability it has produced.

Communities of practice were used by corporations as well learning institutions. An example is Chrysler. The development of communities of practice has sped up and improved the development of new products. The company—now DaimlerChrysler—via the CoPs named *Tech Clubs*, created an Engineering Book of Knowledge – a database that the engineers developed so they could do their jobs. It includes compliance standards, lessons learned, best practice and so on. The key, however, is that the engineers took responsibility for maintaining this database. Through the Tech Clubs "Engineers have discovered that participation helps them do their jobs better, and the time spent together is a good investment. It often saves them time later and increases their confidence in their own designs." (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.3).

And to finish, this quote is now my favourite:

> "In short, what makes managing knowledge a challenge is that it is not an object that can be stored, and moved around like a pieces of equipment or a document. It resides in the skills, understanding and relationships of its members as well as in the tools, documents and processes that embody aspects of this knowledge. Companies must manage their knowledge in ways that do not merely reduce it to an object". (Ibid, p.11).

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OK so what makes them work?

- Participants' commitment to the idea
- Seeing value in sharing ideas and practice
- Having a facilitator – possibly on a rotating basis or allowing a leader to emerge
- Having some shared and valued outcomes
- Having regular meetings
- Integrating them into the organisation—by allowing participation, removing barriers and valuing their role
- "If organisations fail to take active steps in this direction communities of practice will still exists, but they are unlikely to achieve their full potential." (ibid, p.13).
- A basic structure—a domain of knowledge, a community of people and shared practice
- Asking exploratory questions.

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