

Full Day Workshop for C& T 2003-02-17

Phase change in a community of practice: exploring the issues and gathering insights

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Structure of the workshop:

This full day workshop that will consist of a number of sections covering different aspects of phase change in distributed communities of practice. These will feature in-depth examination of one case where we think a phase-change in an emerging dispersed community of practice occurred. The case features an account of one of the threads leading to the development of CPsquare—a nascent community of practice. In the spirit of the co-production of meaning amongst people, we will use an appreciative enquiry model, to invite contributions from potential workshop participants to share their comparable or contrasting experiences. This activity will be offered both prior to meeting face to face in an online environment and at the workshop.

This workshop extends the usual workshop format to explore and demonstrate the possibilities of phase change in practice. Six weeks prior to the workshop at the C&T conference in September 2003, each of the organizers will present a position statement in an online discussion space to which participants will be invited to join, share their stories and to ask clarifying questions. The position statements, the online discussion and the face-to-face session will all address a series of questions around the focal points described below. The questions we will use to explore each focal point, or issue, include:

- *What was observable around this issue?*
- *What was the actual experience?*
- *What forces were at play?*
- *What actions or interventions occurred?*
- *What were the outcomes?*
- *What was the logic of the change?*
- *Why does this matter?*

In the morning of the face-to-face workshop, there will be moderated interaction to present the main case study, recapitulate the online discussion and elicit experience from workshop participants that helps illuminate the main case.

In the afternoon session (the structure will depend on the number of registrants for the day) small groups will work with the morning's contributions and discuss phase change as a pattern of development in communities of practice. The groups will reflect on what the discussion might mean for our understanding and for our practice. In a concluding session, the group will collaborate on organising and presenting these reflections as an online resource. There will be an opportunity for some online discussion after the workshop. The workshop should be limited to 30 participants. Flip charts and a projector (i.e., from a computer) will be needed.

Background to the main case being presented:

CPsquare is a community of practice about communities of practice. Its development has several threads, many of which intersect in the case being presented here. Etienne Wenger, John Smith, Bronwyn Stuckey and colleagues conduct an online workshop that is offered several times a year. It has evolved a distinctive design, an archive of the interactions and a growing group of affiliates, associates and workshop alumni. This workshop has attracted a very diverse group of participants with a broad spectrum of expertise: some have attended in their organisational role, while others have sought personal development. The 'stuff' of the workshops includes theory, case studies, and the practice of inquiry, much of which is aimed at harnessing the improvisational nature of community and of learning. Although CPsquare entails other threads, the workshop has proved to be an important vehicle in the development of; new ideas and practices, technologies and their implementation, mechanisms for networking of contributors and participants and styles of collaboration.

Since its inception, the Foundations of Communities of Practice workshop has been offered online 10 times, and there are currently about 300 people with access to the Web Crossing system on which it is currently offered. The social and technical structure is generally considered to be effective. For most participants the experience of interacting in the workshop is intense, and many alumni become involved in follow-on projects, as mentors in subsequent workshops, in collaborative projects or in bringing others into the network. This bonding may be partly attributed to a number of factors including; the nature of the issues being explored, the dedication and insight of the core members of the community, the way community values are expressed in the Web Crossing platform (i.e., support of community interactions and resources). Access to the workshop community and its resources depends on what you want to do: workshops from the start require a fee to be paid, though alumni participate in further sessions and access the archive or other project spaces under a variety of arrangements.

In June 2002, a face-to-face dialog was held in Setúbal, Portugal. 27 people from 9 countries and different online workshops attended. There were some "non-alumni" who participated and who played significant roles. This was a diverse and potent mix. Many issues emerged, some of them painful. Objectives and expectations were varied: some brought case studies and live problems; others wished to see what would emerge in an offline forum. The core group wished to explain a proposal to change

the structure and institutional status of the community, to ensure its viability. This is the phase change of the title.

Focal Points

We have selected the following issues as focal points for the workshop:

1. **Authority and legitimacy.** Do ‘core’ members of a community have greater authority to change things? Without formal leadership, can change be legitimized? Can newcomers shape the course of a community of practice?
2. **Ways of talking.** Finding effective ways to talk (large groups vs. small, walks to and from lodging vs. “sessions”, case studies vs. “inquiries”) were challenging domains of experimentation. Does phase change require new genres and new language? What might this mean? Where do the new ways come from and what happens to the “old”?
3. **Rites of passage.** At the Setúbal meeting, plans to ‘hatch’ the next stage of CPsquare were discussed. These were contested by participants comfortable with the ideology, modes of address and structures of the ‘earlier’ version. How easy is it for CoPs to survive different stages of development? Can personal growth be aligned with community transformation? Does phase change mean new members, or are existing community members ‘renewed’?
4. **Online and offline.** The Setubal dialog, an offline interaction, drew much of its power from the online preparation and work of many of the participants. The ‘maintenance’ of the experience, after the week’s event, has also happened online. What is the status of ‘visitors’, or those who were not involved in the pre and post online activity? How active and how constant do members of a community have to be? Can a community be ‘held’ by a few dedicated members? How do strangers and visitors affect the status quo?
5. **The reflective community.** CPsquare may be seen as a metalevel, or ‘second order’ organization, that drives exchange of experience among practitioners from a wide range of domains who have an apostolic role in their different professions. To what extent can the CPsquare experience inform local practice? Are there transferable or foundation experiences? Can lessons be learned? How complex are these?
6. **Being a “founding outsider”.** During the four and a half days, a majority of the participants reported that they felt like “outsiders” in one way or another—and at one point or another. What was that about? Is that kind of discomfort a correlate of learning depth in a social learning environment?
7. **Phase-change outcomes.** Many participants had the strong sense that a phase change had occurred, but there would be a remarkable diversity of accounts of what exactly the change was. Would someone outside “the community” be able to recognize the significance of the event or of the change?

Personal details of Workshop Organizers

John D. Smith. My relevant expertise is in the design and facilitation of online workshops and face-to-face dialogs. I coach communities of practice, their leaders and their sponsors.

Paul Robinson. My relevant expertise is educational (particularly group work and communication skills teaching) and in informatics (particularly the ways that human and manufactured computational systems interact).

Elisabeth Davenport: was appointed Professor of Information Management in Napier University Business School in 1998. She is currently head of the Social Informatics Group in the School of Computing at Napier, and a Board Member of the International Democracy Centre there. Dr Davenport has recently been PI for two projects funded by the European Commission (EC) in the areas of community informatics, and knowledge management for SMEs in the tourism sector. She is currently PI for a further EC project that seeks to build innovative support for firms seeking partners for virtual enterprise, and co-investigaor for a project on electronic government. She is a member of Panel 6 of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board, a Fellow of the Institute for Information Scientists in the UK, and is a Visiting Scholar in Indiana University. She is currently a member of several editorial boards (including the Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, Library Quarterly and Information Research). Her current areas of teaching and research include knowledge management, communities of practice, strategic information management, social intelligence and ethnographic methods in the workplace.

Dr John Götze has worked with e-governance for more than 10 years. He was probably the first Dane to get a PhD in participatory design, but left research for a career in the civil service. He worked in Sweden for 5 year building the Swedish e-government strategy. Today, he is a senior advisor in the Danish National IT and Telecom Agency.

Beverly Trayner, MSc, Development Management, Lecturer, Escola Superior de Ciências Empresariais, Setúbal, Portugal

Patricia Arnold, Dr. phil., has worked and has been involved in research on e-learning since 1996 with a special focus on online communities within the educational realm.

Marc Coenders, has worked in the design of networks in which intra-organizational communities of practice are embedded and in the facilitation of these communities. His current areas of interests are: the creation of space for learning, learning infrastructures, knowledge productivity.