



Otago Medical School

Te Kura Hauora o Ōtākou

Do you know...

about Communities of Practice?



WHAT IS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

While few of us use the expression, Community of Practice, we all live and work in communities of practice.

“A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”.

– Etienne Wenger (Educator) | Wenger’s website: <http://wenger-trayner.com/about-2/>

HOW ARE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE RELEVANT TO HEALTH PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION?

A significant part of undergraduate health professional education occurs in clinical areas – that is, the workplace.

So learning, as a fundamentally social process, occurs in everyday situations over morning tea, working out how to use a new piece of equipment or practising a clinical procedure.

In the context of the education of health professionals, Little et al wrote:

“A community of practice relies upon the mutual engagement of people in a similar situation working towards a common goal” – Little et al. (Medical educators)

Cooperative learning happens when people negotiate and make sense of their shared experience to enhance their shared practice.

HOW CAN YOU FORM A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

Wenger (1998) describes four inter-dependent components that form a community of practice:

- Community
- Practice
- Meaning
- Identity

Participating with other people in **meaningful** activities helps individuals to shape their **identity**. A **community** arises because participants all share a passion for a particular **practice**.

These informal social arrangements have come to be called **communities of practice**.

For example:



A community of interest	A learning community	A community of practice
Gathers around a topic such as a new procedure or perhaps a suggested solution to a problem	Gathers to learn a topic; members are often novices, may/or may not have an instructor or advanced member	Gathers regularly to learn and to enhance practice. Practitioners engage in activities together to share ideas that advance the practice

Similarly, when we engage in conversations over a drink, a meal or those brief encounters in the hallway we may discover the richness of everyday learning that enhance the practices we care about. These encounters may be at work or outside it; they shape us as a person and how we come to know our professional practice.

THE IMPLICIT NATURE OF OUR SOCIAL WORLD

Like an iceberg, what we see is only a small portion of what drives social life.

For example, we learn and use language without thinking about the grammar and the sounds that comprise language. Phonetics, phonemics, syntax and semantics are below the surface of most everyday speech acts. However, attending a basic course or reading a book on descriptive linguistics will uncover the complexity of language we take for granted each and every day. Knowledge of social dynamics similarly helps us to enhance what we take for granted about the communities in which we practice.

Our fundamental human nature is social and all experience is swayed by our social context. For example, to regard health professionals and patients solely as separate individuals fails to acknowledge the web of relationships that connect humans. Health professionals rely on colleagues to inform their practice for the best outcomes of patients. When we cross the threshold of social learning, we begin to appreciate how informal communities of practice provide opportunities to learn from each other, and to make learning a part of our everyday lives.

Nothing is as practical as a good theory

– Kurt Lewin (Social psychologist)



SUGGESTED READING

Jaye, C., T. Egan, K. Smith-Han. (2010) Clinical Communities of Practice and normalising technologies of self: learning to fit in on the surgical ward. *Anthropology & Medicine* Vol.17, Is. 1

Little, D., Butcher, K., Atkinson, S., Still, D., & Vasant, J. (2014). A regional teaching fellow community of practice. *The Clinical Teacher* 11,516-519.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

For further information and assistance, contact your local Medical or Clinical Education Advisor: otago.ac.nz/medicine/mbchb

Early Learning in Medicine (ELM)

Education Advisor, ELM: Tony Barrett tony.barrett@otago.ac.nz

Dunedin School of Medicine

Education Advisor: David Tordoff david.tordoff@otago.ac.nz

Clinical Education Advisor: appointment pending david.tordoff@otago.ac.nz

University of Otago, Christchurch

Education Advisor: Anthony Ali anthony.ali@otago.ac.nz

Clinical Education Advisor: Maggie Meeks Maggie.Meeks@cdhb.health.nz

University of Otago, Wellington

Education Advisors: Peter Gallagher peter.gallagher@otago.ac.nz

Kath Hoare kath.hoare@otago.ac.nz

Clinical Education Advisors: Sean Hanna (Wellington) sean.hanna@otago.ac.nz

Joy Percy (Palmerston North) joy.percy@midcentraldhb.govt.nz

Emma Merry (Hawke's Bay) emma.merry@hawkesbaydhb.govt.nz

Do you know ...

