

Building a Community of Practice: Insights From Vicarious Learning and Crowdsourcing

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Abstract

A community of practice (COP) can offer learning and support as a group of people who come together to share concerns, best practices, or new knowledge about some shared interest or passion. However, creating or joining a COP may present challenges, especially for those whose networks are relatively undeveloped. In this article, we define a COP and share how vicarious learning and crowdsourcing, as pragmatic, relational, and information-gathering processes, offer important benefits to teaching and learning COPs. After discussing how vicarious learning and crowdsourcing can be extended within a COP, we offer specific theory-to-practice learning ideas and suggestions. We end the article with brief insights for other management educators about our own COP experiences.

Keywords

community of practice, vicarious learning, crowdsourcing, social learning theory, mentoring, Wenger

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A community of practice (COP, Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium, 2016; Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) is a group of people who come together to share concerns, best practices, or new knowledge about some shared interest or passion. However, forming a COP presents some challenges. The specific type of support group members need might be unavailable or too limited (Bottoms et al., 2013). Those whose networks are relatively underdeveloped may not know how to connect with others who share their interest. Finally, the “how” of COPs, that is, how learning, insights and COP member growth actually occur within COPs is not often articulated. In this article, we show how vicarious learning (VL, Bandura, 1977b; Moberg, 2006; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2002) and crowdsourcing (CS, Brabham, 2013) can overcome those challenges and contribute important benefits to teaching and learning COPs, helping management educators become more effective.

We define a COP’s characteristics, and discuss how intentional and focused VL and CS can each create specific learning processes within COPs. In our experience, VL offers ongoing, regular opportunities to interact among COP members, and learning outcomes are emergent over time. CS by contrast offers practical solutions to topic- or issue-specific challenges, occurring when members proactively seek such assistance. After sharing several VL and CS practices that give structure and purpose to COPs, we end the article with brief insights from our own COP that routinely employs VL and CS techniques.

Theoretical Framing

Communities of Practice

COPs are social learning environments that support knowledge development through interactions (Lave & Wenger, 1991), increasing both collective knowledge and individual learning (Smith et al., 2019). While varying contexts engender different forms of COPs, they share six attributes (Monaghan, 2011, p. 430), summarized below:

1. COPs self-form and self-govern;
2. COP members share common interests and passion about its topic;
3. COP members themselves create new knowledge and learning;
4. Learning within the COP occurs in real time;
5. COPs can form in any life arena or for any shared passion; and
6. COPs help develop shared meaning and identity for professionals.

Wenger and colleagues (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) identified *purpose*, *people*, and *practice* or what Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015) now call domain, community, and practice, as the three essential elements of a COP, noting dynamic interactions among them as members’ needs and contributions change. Thus, COPs can foster a broad and iterative form of mentoring. Peers and those at different career stages learn from each other (Satterly et al., 2018), and those with much experience can learn from those with much less experience (Morris, 2017), offering a reciprocal

and multidimensional experience. Furthermore, with a shared purpose of developing effective teaching, COPs can nurture safe and intentional approaches to teacher development and learning. Below, we highlight VL and CS as two social learning processes that can improve COPs' learning benefits.

Vicarious Learning

VL is the act of understanding, learning, feeling, or knowing via the experiences of others (Cox et al., 1999; Forbes, 2022). It is a key element within social learning theory (Bandura, 1977a), allowing experience to be “. . . helpfully ‘re-used’ by showing it to other learners who face a problem similar to one addressed . . .” (Cox et al., 1999, p. 432).

VL often occurs within a specific group of people who want to address a particular learning or skill development need. Individuals look to groups to satisfy fundamental needs, determine what is important, and build relationships, based on shared experiences or interests (Mathieu et al., 2017). As groups can be more cognitively relevant and proximal to individuals than their organizations or professions, individuals may rely more on groups for information (Johnson et al., 2006; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005). Through intentional dialogue, demonstration, or observation (Cox et al., 1999; Mayes, 2015), as well as storytelling (Myers, 2022), group members share in others' concrete experience, internalize the stories, and model lessons in their own practice, seeking feedback to continually improve. In turn, they develop self-beliefs and self-regulation supporting their own practice (Bandura, 1977a).

Used within a COP, members make iterative, purposeful connections, allowing deeper and more complex learning and knowledge transfer (Bell et al., 2017; Blume et al., 2010; Colquitt et al., 2000). VL opportunities in a COP can include group discussions (Bass, 1954), “train-the-trainer” experiences (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; Lane & Mitchell, 2013), and other forms of discourse such as critiquing recorded discussions (Mayes, 2015). Bolstered by this support and the “reciprocity of vicarious learning” (Myers, 2021, p. 940), educators may then apply what they learn from the COP in numerous settings across their institutions (Baldwin & Ford, 1988).

Crowdsourcing

CS entails seeking guidance on a specific, difficult problem, engaging a group of relevant others to generate solutions. First used to describe companies soliciting solutions for product development problems from internet users (Brabham, 2008; Howe, 2006), “crowdsourcing” now is used ubiquitously to describe collaborative problem-solving efforts on- or offline (Brabham, 2013). By reaching beyond recognized experts for solutions, the latent potential of the crowd can be liberated to solve vexing challenges (Howe, 2009).

CS can address well-defined, simple problems quickly (Afuah & Tucci, 2012) when the problem solver provides a clear but open-ended question to participants for

a specific purpose (Brabham, 2013). The seeker mines the crowd's collective intelligence and sifts through the array of potential suggestions to select the best fit. CS can also create generative ideas for complex problem-solving (Mount et al., 2020). The crowd can be guided through a multistep process to address ill-defined and wicked problems (Majchrzak & Malhotra, 2019; Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2014). The key in either scenario is to move from knowledge sharing to knowledge combining, "the bricolage of ideas, resolution of trade-offs and conflicts, and co-creation" of solutions (Mount et al., 2020, p. 107), harnessing the wisdom of the crowd (Surowiecki, 2005).

Furthermore, CS can occur across modalities. Online CS flourished with the COVID-19 pandemic (Rogers, 2021). One prominent platform, Reddit, now has an active 100,000+ member subreddit (r/Professors, n.d.) where members post specific teaching and learning issues they have encountered and others share possible solutions to them. CS also emerges from in-person groups that have deliberate goals, such as Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), where participants with a common identity or passion meet to share ideas (Green, 2018). Finally, cross-platform CS is also an option. The Women of Organizational Behavior (WOB) Facebook group, for example, utilizes online CS with occasional in-person engagements.

VL and CS in COPs

Table 1 offers specific ideas and suggestions for using VL and CS to enhance learning in COPs.

Vicarious Learning

Encourage Storytelling. Although a COP has a stated purpose, make time to hear members' musings, meanderings, and stories, even if they appear tangential. Myers (2022) found "collective value of learning through [interpersonal] storytelling" (p. 413), which begins when something in the conversation or environment triggers a member to tell other members about their experiences with a situation. Through "questions and feedback" from others, COP members create meaning and update their understanding of the situation for the future (p. 404).

Increase Collaborative Opportunities. A shared project or deliverable related to a COP brings members together. During that collaboration, side conversations often unfold, allowing VL opportunities. Consistent with a COP's defining characteristics, collaborations can meet members' varied needs, including shared scholarship, presentations, or leadership opportunities as ways to emphasize "the overarching process of learning (vs. just seeking or sharing knowledge) in these interactions" (Myers, 2021, p. 940).

Embrace Relationships, Especially One-on-One Opportunities. COP membership creates a "doorway" to one-on-one relationships, allowing for VL on topics adjacent to those directly germane to a larger COP. Individual members can seek purposeful advice or participate in some activity together. Williams et al. (2016) explored career coaching

Table I. Theory to Practice Insights for Teaching and Learning CCOPs From VL and CS.

COP process	Idea	Examples and suggestions
VL	Encourage storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Stories from experienced members shorten learning curves and avoid mistakes about innovations and teaching practicesHarnesses collective learning through storiesCreate applied learning through collaborative projects or eventsDevelop iterative opportunities for shared outputs consistent with members' needsOne-on-ones allow VL about "COP adjacent" issues between membersIncreases likelihood for learning what members do not know they do not knowNot simply additive, CS solutions build on each other, improving quality and integrating others' experiencesReplaces repetition with iterative solutions progress
CS	Increase collaborative opportunities Embrace relationships, especially one-on-one Advance "knowledge sharing" to "knowledge combining" Define goals to ask the right questions Engage with a wide array of responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Develop iterative opportunities for shared outputs consistent with members' needsOne-on-ones allow VL about "COP adjacent" issues between membersIncreases likelihood for learning what members do not know they do not knowNot simply additive, CS solutions build on each other, improving quality and integrating others' experiencesReplaces repetition with iterative solutions progressCS effectiveness and commitment increase by asking targeted questions of the groupClear questions help gather the right members generating relevant solutionsResist dismissing CS solutions quicklyCreate structures where all potential solutions remain included and possible

Note. COP = community of practice; VL = vicarious learning; CS = crowdsourcing.

COPs for PhD students studying biomedical science and found evidence of one-on-one VL. Members “earmarked time for dedicated” conversations (p. 16), leveraging their different institutional and expertise backgrounds to generate discussions and unique insights into issues members may not even realize were relevant.

Crowdsourcing

Advance From “Knowledge Sharing” to “Knowledge Combining”. Mount et al. (2020) described how knowledge *combining* using CS at a conference generated solutions to heighten HIV/AIDS awareness. Organizers used an online platform to facilitate cycles of sharing, voting on, editing, and refining ideas to cocreate solutions. Within a COP, designating a process leader to perform this function iterates solutions, progressing quality through the wisdom of crowds (Brabham, 2013; Surowiecki, 2005).

Define Your Goal and Ask the Right Question. Without a clear goal and well-framed question, a CS group can easily lose focus (Zheng et al., 2011). Questions that articulate the problem *and* what you want to know build a “keystone” (Füller et al., 2021), generating useful responses (Cancialosi, 2019). Online platform Idea Drop (Harwood, 2017) defined effective questions as interesting, relevant to responders, and neither too broad nor too narrow. CS questions praised by Idea Drop, for example, included E.ON’s “How can we measure energy in more meaningful ways than kWh or money so that people use less?” and Lego’s “How can we double the fun of the Lego play experience?” Clear questions also increase a COP’s task commitment (Gladstein, 1984).

Stay Open to the Wide Array of Responses You May Receive. CS wisdom can offer surprises, and “out of the box” solutions and unexpected ideas may come from many sources (Cancialosi, 2019; Howe, 2009; Simula & Ahola, 2014). Engaging with the array of responses and allowing them to “percolate” for a period of time buffers the chance that a COP member dismisses a relevant solution. For example, Monument Lab (Monument Lab: Philadelphia [Citywide Exhibition], n.d.) created such structures when it asked Philadelphians to reimagine the definition of a monument. They received 4,500 submissions for creative proposals, from painting borders around former red-lined neighborhoods to streaming citizen ideas for urban renewal on a dedicated monitor, offering a shared space for citizens to reflect on those ideas.

Concluding Thoughts

We created our own COP about 10 years ago and routinely employ VL and CS as ways to generate learning and knowledge about management pedagogy within our group. We started in-person, moved online for COVID-19, and now “live” both online and in-person. We connected through a mutual professional society, but members have arrived over time, and composition has shifted without a formal membership process. VL and CS provide iterative and practical structures that shorten learning curves

around teaching innovations. Because our COP intentionally includes members at different career stages—ranging from doctoral students to endowed chairs—and from substantially different types and sizes of institutions, VL and CS range and possibilities are increased. The array of experiences our members share allows our innovating to be more efficient, avoiding common problems. We employ the VL and CS ideas and suggestions included in Table 1 in a variety of interactive modes including planned meetings, attending our regular professional society conferences, regular online gatherings, and on-demand connections via phone or email, when one member has an urgent question for which they need a crowdsourced response.

A COP's effectiveness comes from clearly defining and being intentional about its goals. At one end of the spectrum, an educator may simply need to crowdsource a question and get answers without “integrating” into a group, such as with the typically anonymous r/Professors subreddit. At the other end, an educator may seek a longer term COP with others passionate about a shared topic, meeting regularly and learning to develop new knowledge together. Management pedagogy COPs can serve as a springboard for educator development, learning, and connectivity that ultimately enhance management education effectiveness.

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