Background Report on Communities of Practice

Authored by: Prof. Dr. Thomas Eckert

Partner Organisation: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Germany (P1)

Item No. 1

Content

Project number:
543377-LLP-1-2013-1-DE-KA4-KA4MP

1   Background and Purpose

Significantly important in preparation of the DISCUSS tool were interviews undertaken with those experienced in designing, managing and facilitating CoPs. Interviews with these experts were intended as a means of gaining insights into 'good practices' in CoPs: approaches and techniques which have been successful, and ways of developing CoPs and effective collaborative tools within CoPs.

2   Methodology and Approach to Interviews

19 interviews were completed with CoP-experts working in different parts of Europe. A guide for interviews was developed and agreed at the first partner meeting in Munich. This was seen as an aid to assist partners in carrying out semi-structured interviews with respondents; rather than a very structured questionnaire. The intention was to focus on gaining quality insights from personal expert experience, as opposed to undertaking a scientific survey. The interview guide was tested during a first interviews on 2/2/2014. The interview was transcribed and partners analyzed responses during our subsequent online-conference. The guide was slightly adapted and the remaining 18 interviews were completed between 18/2/2014 and 23/8/2014.

Our interview guide was subdivided into three sections:

- The **first section** was the introductory part to initiate the conversation in general terms, as well as to some useful background information about the respondent and about the their own CoP. We asked, for example, about the size of the CoP, the topics covered, actors involved and their main activities.

- The s**econd part** we called the 'story-telling' part. The intention here was to move towards gaining some advice for our own project. We asked about aspects of activities in the CoP that the respondent saw as being either exciting or boring. Which activities may have been positively or negatively commented upon by particular members or stakeholders? Which were seen as being more meaningful in the context of the core purpose of the CoP?

- In the **third part** we focused on more analytic questions about how the CoP may or may not have fulfilled its purpose. For example, we asked about how the participation in the CoP affected the respondent as an individual, how it may have added to their own competences, enhanced their social connections and so on. We also asked if there had been meaningful outcomes, about pos-

sible success factors driving positive outcomes and blockages that may have created negative outcomes.

This strategy was influenced by the methodology suggested by Wenger, Trayner & deLaat (2011) and Morgan-Klein & Osborne (2007).

3 Profile of Experts Responding

Interviewees were from several countries in Europe: mainly from countries of the persons participating in the DISCUSS project. They all are in a leading position (for example as president or moderator) in at least one CoP. Most of these CoPs started in a European project within an activity of the EU-commission (e.g. EQAVET, Grundtvig) and carried on working after the project was finished. The number of members in these CoPs ranged from about 10 to nearly 1000. It is important to acknowledge, however, that membership in larger communities can become more difficult to define, and it is not always easy in these larger communities who is actually a member and who is not; who is participating actively and who is only passively involved and so on.

4 Interview Results and Insights Gained

Feedback from interviews was always seen, first and foremost, as an important re-source for us in the DISCUSS project design. We wanted to take direct guidance from well-informed and experienced experts on how effective CoPs can be built, as well as on how to avoid mistakes in design and implementation. It made sense, therefore, for us to summarise points emerging from the interviews under the following headings:

- What should we start doing?
- What should we keep on doing?
- What should we stop doing?

Analysis of results was also guided by suggestions from "Grounded Theory" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Naturally enough, we encountered some language problems: most of the interviewers, interviewees and people doing transcription were not working in their mother-tongue. This caused some problems during the interview, interpreting exactly what was being said, and then subsequently transcribing accurately.

Most feedback was in the first two questions (start doing and keep doing). Comments on what we should 'stop doing') were a lot less numerous since a) we ourselves have not really started our program and b) the respondents themselves raised very few points under this heading in realtion to their own CoPs.

Reading the text we found that the 'stories' from our interview-partners were around four topics:

- The person as an individual member of the CoP, or even a facilitator,
- The CoP as a group of people or members
- The topic or theme covered by the CoP, and
- Communication within the CoP, amongst individual members, within the group, and communicating information in the core topic or theme.

Since those four topics are closely linked to each other, respondents did not refer to them as separate items. All spoke about one aspect in relation the other three. Differences in the interviews were less to be seen in the topics that were mentioned but in the emphasis one topic had in relation to the others. The following graphics tries to illustrate the relationship of the topics that were mentioned:

Project number:
543377-LLP-1-2013-1-DE-KA4-KA4MP
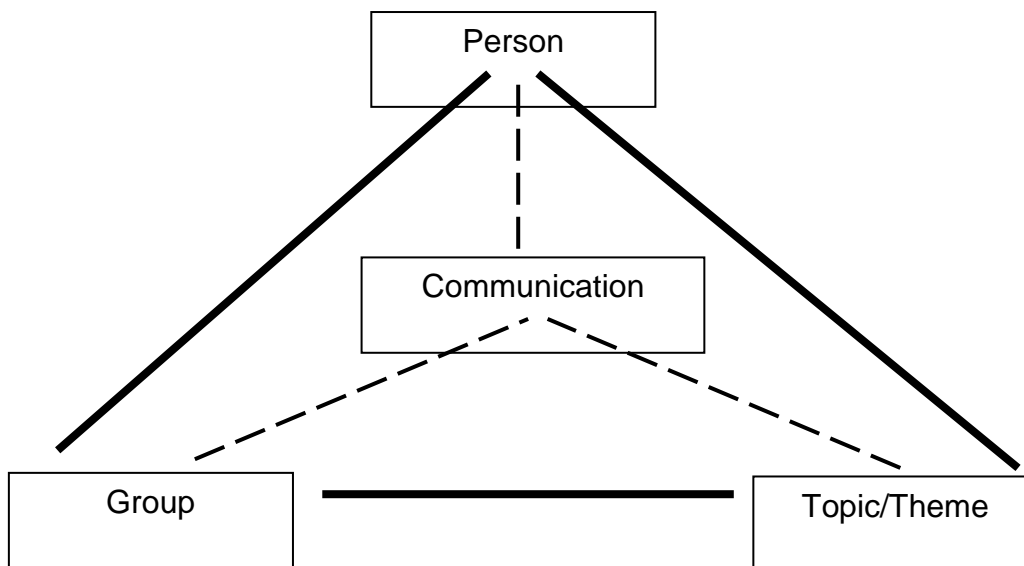
As a first result of the analysis it can be mentioned that the success of a CoP or its sustainability does not primarily depend on the tools that can be used but on the relationships that are described in the picture above. There is a strong belief by nearly all of the interview-partners that development of a CoP cannot be easily influenced from external forces. It only can develop itself from the inside. As a consequence tools must facilitate developments within the CoPs but they cannot have a direct influence.

As indicated by the connections drawn in the picture above and already mentioned the four topics are connected to each other which means that every aspect has an influence on the three other aspects. Often some of these influences are mentioned by the interview-partners but there are some differences in the strength and the direction of the influences mentioned. To make the analysis not too complicated we only are focusing on single aspects.

Communication: Many interview-partners said that there should be face-to-face contacts in a CoP from time to time to support the motivation of the members to participate in the meetings and (online) activities of the group. This can also be done via Conferences or Prizes as can be seen in the following example out or the interviews:

> "The Validation Prize was a very good idea, though the response was lower than expected. The on-line debates are a very interesting activity that although it generates a lot of coordinating work when setting it up, it has proven to attract a lot of participation. The final Conference was an exciting activity to organize with a very positive and happy result. From my point of view is the best activity we have done in the project."

Especially in CoPs where the members come from different countries (as it is the case in European projects) face-to-face contacts can help to deal with language problems and intercultural differences. In addition to that the discussions must be supported to facilitate proper understanding of controversial contributions and there must be some agreed rules of communications that define time frames of answering, ways of constructive participation and specific roles and tasks for at least some members. E.g. at least for some topics of the discussion there should be agreed experts within the CoP who facilitate the discussion, keep contact to relevant stakeholders or a greater framework outside the CoP and give the discussion a progressive structure. This should be facilitated by userfriendly tools giving the group the possibility to include as many members as possible as easily as possible and to get a feedback from outside the group or at least from people leaving the CoP.

Group: Someone (or a small group) must take care for the members to participate in the meetings and to facilitate the involvement of the members in the activities of the CoP. This is one important condition for having a shared identity and an organic cooperation, both being relevant for the lifetime of a CoP. Members must successfully learn from each other, they must support each other and they must be aware of the value participation in the CoP has for themselves, for their jobs and things they have to do in connection with or outside the CoP.

Person: Most of the statements about persons participating in a CoP are dealing with a facilitator. There is a broadly shared view that it is very important to have a person to facilitate the communication, discussions and activities of the CoP. This person must act as a supportive role model, must provide up-to-date information to the group and inform quickly about new important development, must be a well trained moderator and good leader of the community and last but not least be well organized and able to manage the group in a flexible way. On the other hand a CoP can only be as productive as its members. They should be aware of the value in participating, they should be willing to contribute and open to new topics, persons and different views. This does not mean that the success of a CoP depends on the personality of its members and therefore only members with certain abilities should be allowed to participate.

Topic / Theme: It is very important for a CoP that the materials provided are accessible easily, that they are disseminated to all of the members and that they are helpful concerning the intentions of the group and the members by themselves. So they have to focus a clear theme, they must be interesting and useful. The criteria raised here do not only concern the quality of the material, it also means that the tools provided in the CoP environment must be easy to use, reliable and accessible. And it is useful to have different perspectives on one and the same topic as can be seen from the following passage out of the interviews:

"Let's take ourselves as an example, which is the real life example: I'm working with the largest construction training company in Germany to develop mobile applications to support apprentices with both, in the workplace and in the training center. Now, what's, the „Meisters" (the trainers) in a sense themselves are skilled workers, and quite a few of them are interested in technologies, especially in high technology areas like horizontal drilling (?). They don't even know the possibilities of what we can develop. Equally the hard tech developers – we're using programmers from Austria and Barcelona – don't know what learning support is needed. Now the traditional way which is done in the business is requirement analysis. But requirement analysis to me is not a pretty effective device, because one doesn't know what's possible, the other doesn't know what's needed. What ends up is a mess in the middle which neither is satisfied with it at the end of the day. So, we work on processes, to get communication between parts of the community of practice, where people in other communities of practice are thought to enable that feedback, dialog and discourse. If you talk to people in education? - Developers, they say it's quite impossible. You can't talk to them. And for that you need boundary objects, and identify where the boundary is between the communities, and start working on objects, which in itself can be very dynamic … to enable a two-ways flow between a community and another community and vice versa."

5   Consequences

From these findings we drew several consequences for constructing the DISCUSS-platform:

- The platform should allow for effective knowledge sharing. So the information section of DISCUSS will hold information and news compiled from relevant project website and present them in a common format.

- The platform should offer different ways of collaboration. Especially thematic work-groups should be offered to allow every member to interact at a personal level, real-time translation to handle language problems and cloud-based wikis allowing for incremental elaboration of a topic. In addition it should be possible to personalize the workspace of a community.

- The platform should support the building of personal relationships with a view to the animation of social life.

- A User management should be offered comprising different levels of access, multi-profiles to allow for different modes of communication and member search using matching criteria. At the moment we are discussing the implementation

of some more features helping to find interesting partners and to personalize information feeds.

6   Literature

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990): Basics of qualitative Research. Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Wenger, E., Trayner, B. & de Laat, M. (2011): Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: a conceptual framework. Ruud de Moor Centrum: Open Universiteit.

Morgan-Klein, B. &Osborne, M. (2008): The concepts and practices of Lifelong Learning. London : Routledge