

Formation of a 'starter' VCoP for the DISCUSS platform

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DISCUSS
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There are two parts to the theoretical framework employed in the DISCUSS project. The first part is based on the key principles of a Community of Practice (CoP) conceptualised and developed by (Wenger et al, 2002) and the other is Engeström's (2001) theory of expansive learning.

For this section of the report it is helpful to clarify the aim of DISCUSS. It is to develop a state-of-the-art platform for CoPs in lifelong learning, helping to foster dialogue and exchange between beneficiaries and users of the Lifelong Learning Program of the European Union, and bringing together project actors, experts, stakeholders, decision makers and end users in a collaborative environment

To realise the aim, organisational capacities, software tools and a technical infrastructure have been built for the CoPs which are stimulating, relevant and valuable, qualities which are necessary to attract and engage members and motivate them to scaffold collaboration and mutual learning across their existing CoP but also to initiate and develop new ones.

1 Formation of a 'starter' VCoP for the DISCUSS platform

1.1 Introduction

In this section of the report we explain the theoretical basis of the DISCUSS platform and the basis of the development of a prototype, or a working example, of a virtual community of practice (VCoP) for professionals and others engaged in or interested in lifelong learning, especially project work.

We follow this with an explanation of how the architecture of the project became a key feature not only in the development of the DISCUSS project as conceptualised but for the development of a working example of a VCoP.

We elaborate on the role of the five thematic areas - each of which reflects a strategic priority or topic of the European Lifelong Learning programme - in developing the working example of a VCoP. We also explain the significance of the criteria of connectivity, complementarity and potential for cross-program synergies.

Finally we give an indication of how the LLL projects selected and the individuals we interviewed – themselves endeavouring to become or to develop as communities of practice, though not virtual – also helped us to identify the key features or characteristics of the working examples of VCoPs.

1.2 Theoretical foundation

The variety of features of communities of practice identified in the literature – and reinforced by our own findings - all provide strong evidence that the development of a “prototype” in the engineering sense is not possible when working in this field. However, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder’s (2002) seven principles for cultivating ‘communities of practice’ are very helpful for identifying the characteristics to which a community of practice needs to aspire if it is to be successful. These are 1. the capacity to adapt 2. the facility for open dialogue within the CoP and with outside perspectives 3. the accommodation of different levels of participation 4. the development of both public and private community spaces 5. the creation of opportunities for participants to explicitly discuss the value and productivity of their participation in the group 6. Combination of familiarity and interest so that both conventional and radical wisdom are explored 7. Creating a natural rhythm for the particular community.

Another feature of relevance to DISCUSS and its engagement with existing projects in lifelong learning is that of the networks and networking which already goes on between members of the projects, outside of those projects.

Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011) draw attention to the importance of networks and how networks and communities often develop together. At the same time, although being interconnected can often increase the sense of community through a shared concern, they point out that networks do not necessarily have the necessary ‘self-awareness to achieve a desired level of collective intentionality’. This means that a shared identity has to be developed. On the other hand, the new connections also have the potential to draw new boundaries with fresh perspectives ‘because each new connection brings with it a network of other connections that can affect the community and what it does together’.

Wenger et al’s (2011) analysis of the differences between communities and networks is helpful to DISCUSS in the development of a working example of a VCoP because many of those whom the project is aiming to attract are engaged in project-based lifelong learning work for which cross-cutting networks can be of crucial importance.

As Jutte et al (2007) explain, drawing on Schenk’s (1995, p. 97) work, the analysis of the networks can be productive and need not be a complex or complicated process. They argue that accumulating and then visualizing the ties can help in ‘gaining awareness of one’s own networks and their structure’. Network members’ experiences and expectations are what they call ‘the social memory of the system’ and as such can be significant sources of information (p. 11).

As authors consistently emphasize, for their development CoPs are dependent upon the learning of those involved. For example, Wenger et al (2011) explain that ‘Social learning is enhanced by a dynamic interplay of both community and network processes. Such interplay combines focus and fluidity as it braids individual and collective learning. The work of fostering learning needs to take advantage of this complementarity’.

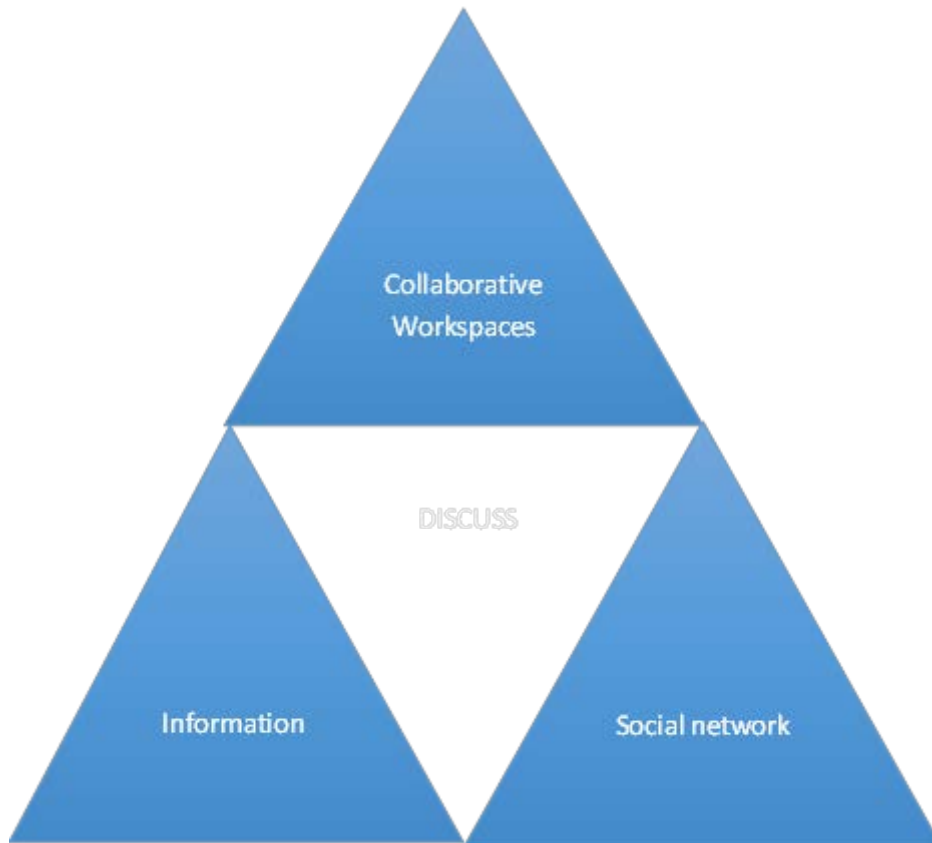
Similarly, whilst Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007) focus on VCoPs for learners in lifelong learning in the context of the pedagogy of e-learning, the points they make are also salient for staff engaged in lifelong learning-related VCoPs. The authors draw attention to Hung and Chen's (2001) work on e-learning which uses the social constructivist ideas of Vygotsky (1978) to produce the design principles for of commonality, situatedness, interdependency, and infrastructure. As Morgan-Klein and Osborne go on to explain, for Hung and Chen 'commonality refers to the concept that learning occurs through participation in social communities, and in constructing and developing identity within these communities ... where a set of individuals are united both in action and in the meaning that that action has, both for themselves, and for the larger collective'. Situatedness for Hung and Chen (2001, p7) is associated with 'rich situations and social constructivist acts'. Interdependency refers to participants within a learning group taking advantage of the different strengths of individuals using diversity in a positive manner, whilst infrastructure refers to 'rules and processes, accountability mechanisms and facilitating structures' (Hung and Chen, 2001, p9)

In working towards identifying the chief working characteristics of a VCoP, Xu et al (2005) work is also helpful. They set out to define the user requirements of social navigation in a CoP. Similar to the DISCUSS project, they had to develop their idea of what their 'target CoP' would look like. In addition, unlike DISCUSS they did not have a navigation space. It is the platform developed by DISCUSS which enables the project to avoid the 'chicken and egg' problem faced by Xu et al. Although it is true that nearly ten years on members of CoPs are far more likely to be using social media and many may be more familiar now with the virtual world, the DISCUSS team still had to assume that the new VCoPs' participants would not necessarily be familiar with working in a VCoP. Our data collection from a range of existing real world CoPs has been instrumental in helping us to create a working example of a VCoP in order, like Xu et al, to be able to design a platform to reflect the real user needs, in terms of social navigation so that participants can: *'get into the world of virtual community of practice'*.

1.3 Architecture of the DISCUSS project

In one sense, though the members of DISCUSS have had to become detached from the work of the LLL projects in order to obtain an overall perspective for developing the platform, at the same time they have themselves been involved in such projects, and some still are. It is then perhaps not surprising that the architecture developed for the DISCUSS project also helps to provide a key to the development of the prototype VCoP. The three pillars on which DISCUSS rests are shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
Architecture of the DISCUSS project



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The information pillar consists of information and news compiled from relevant project websites. To allow for effective knowledge sharing, project information from external websites is delivered in a common format, comprising a) LLL priority / theme addressed, b) background information, c) issue or problem raised, d) solutions developed, e) links to the project results, f) formats and language versions available, g) level of dissemination, h) major topics and keywords for discussion in the CoPs.

The collaborative workspaces offer a variety of rich tools for asynchronous and synchronous communication, which can be used to identify, explore, discuss or develop concrete activities with regard to an issue or problem of common interest. The collaborative workspaces comprise a) thematic workgroups, which allow members to interact at a personal level, b) chat with real-time translation into the user languages, c) cloud-based wiki, which allows for incremental elaboration of a theme or issue, knowledge management, building glossaries and bringing together knowledge gained from discussions in one place.

The social network pillar supports the building of personal relationships (and trust) between the members, with a view to the animation of social life and further evolution of the community after the completion of the project.

DISCUSS is designed to support lifelong learning communities of practice around the themes that project members and other interested individuals and organisations themselves identify as important for their work. However, to provide the Platform with an initial focus, the first CoPs are built around five thematic areas each of which reflects a strategic priority or topic of the European Lifelong Learning programme.

Those themes are: 1) validation of lifelong learning; 2) improving the quality of adult education by promoting social and economic cohesion through improved adult learning outcomes 3) Creativity and innovation, including intergenerational learning, learning for senior citizens and family learning 4) Improving quality assurance systems in VET and 5) development of basic skills and the "transversal key competences" of reinforcing key competences, such as digital competence, and bridging the worlds of education and work.

The initial themes are selected along with the criteria of connectivity, complementarity and potential for cross-program synergies. In other words, whilst each of the project communities of practice coming under the theme could begin as a virtual community of practice in its own right, there is the facility for each to either grow and absorb others or join with them and become to become what might be called a 'meta-thematic' virtual community of practice. For example, the validation of informal learning has been made into a cross-cutting theme to make it a fundamental part of every aspect of the LLL program. Users are connected through this theme. The theme is integral also to "quality assurance in education & training", and the drive to discuss "ensuring the quality of IFL validation". In order to prepare for the take-off of the initial CoPs an open consultation of stakeholders and other projects will be conducted.

1.4 Findings from the data

The LLL projects selected as examples of CoPs, and the individuals we interviewed – also helped us to identify the key features or characteristics of the individual ‘starter’ VCoPs – with of course the potential to grow or become part of a ‘meta-thematic’ virtual community of practice.

Generally, despite every effort to help people to communicate digitally, from our findings this only seems to work if there are also face-to-face opportunities. This suggests that VCoPs will not completely replace non-VCoPs so the need to include, in the project budgets, funding for face-to-face opportunities will continue. Another important consideration for fruitful digital working is the need for agreed ‘communication rules’, including related to translation, and the appointment of individuals within the VCoP to manage these, facilitated by user-friendly tools. The VCoP also needs to have a facilitator, who may also be the person who manages the ‘communication rules’, but who also has leadership qualities. Also vital according to our findings is a clear topic or theme for the VCoP that is realised through appropriate and easily accessible materials. This is especially the case where two or more established CoPs, each with their own expertise and agendas, are working together.

From these findings it is clear that the following are essential for our working examples of VCoPs. Further details of the findings and resulting development needs for the platform can be found in the conceptual framework.

- There needs to be effective knowledge sharing using the information section of DISCUSS
- Different methods of collaboration are needed to allow every member to interact at a personal level including real-time translation to handle language problems and cloud-based wikis allowing for incremental elaboration of a topic.
- The building of personal relationships with opportunities for social interaction
- It is important to have different levels of access to allow for different modes of communication and member search using matching criteria.

2 Developing a 'starter' VCoP for the DISCUSS platform: The 12 step process

Here we outline a 12-step process (can be made into a diagram) as a working example of moving from a CoP to a 'starter' VCoP with a project working to the theme of improving the quality of adult education by promoting social and economic cohesion through improved adult learning outcomes with potential for cross-programme synergies. The project is looking to link with other similar projects as a VCoP for development and sustainability of the project's aims after funding ends.

1. The project is already functioning as a non-virtual CoP with a number of the impediments to working described above but with a facilitator and activists
2. CoP activists to analyse their practice and those of the CoP members for whether they are already working to the CoP principles and if so which ones
3. DISCUSS to identify and work with the CoP activists to analyse their practice in relation to networking as an important and potentially tricky element in the process of 'growing the community'
4. DISCUSS to take cross-section of CoP members' advice on setting up the information processing and management relevant to the project/theme using the DISCUSS pyramid framework and the 3 pillars (Workflow unit a)
5. We will work with the CoP members to assist them in understanding how the DISCUSS architecture can work for their project as currently constituted (Workflow unit a)
6. We will work with the CoP members to understand how to exploit the DISCUSS architecture to develop their CoP work and identify in what ways becoming VCoP can assist and develop this work qualitatively (Workflow unit b)
7. We will help the CoP understand how to exploit the DISCUSS architecture for their CoP outreach work and identify in what ways becoming a VCoP can assist with and expand this work for cross-programme synergies with similar projects and partners (Workflow unit c)
8. We will monitor to see how they manage/whether it is manageable for them (Workflow unit d)

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9. We will gather VCoP feedback to see if members are able to function more effectively as a VCoP (ie closer to our framework) with DISCUSS as compared to before as a CoP (Workflow unit e)
10. We will make modifications according to user recommendations (Workflow unit e)
11. We will work with VCoP members to help attract further partners either through activities of VCoP or through deliberate recruitment
12. We will identify, with VCoP methods for adapting/using the above steps, including consideration of the theoretical framework for a VCoP, in the integration new members

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