

Report on design principles and workflow

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1 What is DISCUSS?

DISCUSS is a transversal project, which is currently conducted under the KA4 strand of the Lifelong Learning program of the European Union. The aim of the project is to develop state-of-the-art online Communities of Practice, helping to foster dialogue and exchange between beneficiaries and users of the LLL and Erasmus+ program. The major target group of the project is practitioners in the field of lifelong learning, i.e. schools, universities, training centres, research centres, organisations and companies that design, provide, evaluate and certify learning. The project in particular is targeting at organisations that have as core activity lifelong learning and, individual persons that are working in lifelong learning as researchers, teachers, trainers, human resource staff, including administrative and support staff in educational establishments.

2 Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs) in Lifelong Learning

According to Wenger “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly“ (Wenger 2010). They build a common stock of knowledge, accumulate expertise in their domain, and develop their shared practice by interacting around problems, solutions, and insights. CoPs can be distinguished from other types communities along with the following criteria:

- The existence of a boundary, which marks the line between the community and other communities as well as other types of social relations. The boundary is defined by a shared domain of interest, and the commitment of its members to this domain. This is the common ground, which inspires the members of the community to participate, guides their learning and gives meaning to their actions.
- The existence of a domain: membership implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. However, the domain is not necessarily something recognized as “expertise” outside the community.
- The existence of community life: Being part of the community implies to engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. The members build relationships that enable them to learn from each

other. However, having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together. Nor do community members necessarily work together on a daily basis.

- The existence of a common practice: a community of practice is not merely a community of interest—people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice.

Communities of Practice vary widely in name, style and size. They have different life cycles, from short-lived to long-lived, and may emerge within, across or outside organisational contexts. In the real world we find a broad range of Communities of Practice. From those, who build on weak ties and informal relationships between its members, to communities who have gained formal recognition, and shaped into formalized membership. Communities of practice can be intended and designed, but also emerge from spontaneous action, temporarily events and occasions. They can be composed of persons having the same profession or function, or conversely, people, who have a completely different professional background and experience.¹

2.1 “Organisational” Elements of the DISCUSS VCoPs

It is noteworthy to mention that many of the examples of CoPs described in the literature have emerged from within organisational contexts. They have developed from voluntary initiative inside of organisations or cross-organisation and gain value and recognition through their contribution to the organisation’s program and strategy. The use of software tools in many of these cases may extend the opportunities for ubiquitous knowledge sharing and collaboration, but isn’t requisite for the CoPs to function.

In contrast, the intention of DISCUSS is to build virtual communities of practice, which may have an impact on organisations, but do not necessarily build on their capacities. While the social activities of real world communities may be enhanced by the use of technology, virtually every kind of activity and interaction taking place within a VCoP is mediated through means of technology. This aspect often is neglected, when transferring the concept from face-to-face to virtual CoPs. With regard to the latter one we may even say, that technology, along with the social activities of the VCoP, turns out to be „an equally critical success factor for community building. The major prerequisite for community building is the possibility for potential participants to communicate with one other in a community-specific way. A successful platform,

¹ Wenger, E.; McDermott, R.; Snyder, W.M.: Cultivating Communities of Practice – A Guide to Managing Knowledge, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 2002.

therefore, is one that provides such services to the community as enable rich and appropriate communication and social interaction“.²

The emergence of new, dynamic and interactive web technologies has paved the road to the “social web”, which now satisfies various kinds of personal and professional needs, including social communication, knowledge sharing and virtual collaboration. Moreover, the availability of web 2.0 technologies enabled the massive growth of virtual communities, from large scale social communities like Facebook and Twitter to special interest communities, with only a few hundred members. However, irrespective of scale and scope, all online communities have two interrelated constitutional elements in common: the association of community participants, and the enabling digital platform. While the community members create content, share knowledge and collaborate in accordance with the roles and rules set out for participation, technology supports the tasks of saving, organizing, searching and providing content, coordinating communication and enforcement of community rules.

CoPs are "human institutions", which by definition are natural, spontaneous, and self-directed. So, they hardly can be designed along with traditional principles of organisational design. Different to organisations, participation is voluntary and personal and, their members become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together; membership does not relate to fixed roles or tasks; activities and knowledge are shared, but do not become part of tasks; CoPs are not driven by deliverables with shared goals, milestones and results.

However, it is also true that virtual communities do follow organisational principles, without those coordination and collaboration would not be possible. VCoPs have organisational structures and elements similar to those of real world organisations, such as roles, rules, members or shared definitions and terms as the common language members refer to when interacting. Member roles ensure the legitimacy of activities and to the community signal the capabilities of the owner, community rules control for the legitimacy of membership, normative adequacy of interactions and help to avoid undesirable or offensive action, member profiles allow for the attribution of activities and contributions to persons, selection of contacts with similar or complementary expertise, and to establish connections with other community members. Taxonomies and glossars enable for a common understanding of topics and issues and the development of a shared meaning. To sum up, all these elements support structured interaction between the members and delimit the range of potential activities and repercussions to such an extent, that the community can develop trust and collective identity.³

² Stanoevska-Slabeva, Katarina: Toward a Community-Oriented Design of Internet Platforms. In: International Journal of Electronic Commerce (IJEC) 6 (2002), Nr. 3, p. 71-95.

³ As a matter of course, all these elements do change over time. Members take on new roles, according to their integration into community processes, flexible rules may be necessary to enable communi-

2.1.1 Roles

The allocation of roles is key to every virtual community. Generally speaking, each role is an abstraction of a class of community participants and is described in terms of rights and obligations as well as required capabilities as a prerequisite for role performance. As for the inception stage of the DISCUSS community basic member roles have been defined: administrator, moderator, facilitator, member and guest. Both, administrators and moderators constitute the community management. Their key task is to remove obstacles to participation and encourage contributions. While management roles are assigned, the member role is automatically given to users when they are signed on to the DISCUSS community. It does not give any special right by default but can be edited by administrators to add privileges that might be desirable in certain situations.

The administrator role is automatically given to the creator of a community and gives him total control over the community management including configuration and content management. As for the moderator role DISCUSS holds three different categories:

- (inception stage) Professional CoP moderators, who take care of the community progress and do actively support its “cultivation”. Moreover, they scaffold the development of leadership, emergence of roles and tasks among the members and mediate different interests and potential conflicts between community members. The professional CoP moderators also develop outreach activities, such as bulletins, newsletters, welcoming new members etc.
- Voluntary moderators, who are „thematic matter experts“ in the domain of the CoP. These moderators will be recruited from the members pool, according to matching criteria found in the profiles. Potential persons will be contacted by the CoP and invited to become thematic moderators. Thematic moderators will be rewarded by putting them on the public list of acknowledged experts in a LLL field or area. The task of the thematic moderators is to actively support the identification of discussion topics, the development of knowledge sharing and discussion on themes of particular relevance to the members. Moreover, the thematic moderators support the community members to set up work and discussion groups and develop concrete activities within those groups.
- (inception stage) Platform moderators, who do support the communities in using the DISCUSS infrastructure and tools. For example, working in co-working

cation and collaboration among heterogenous user groups with different communication and interaction styles, member descriptions and profiles may change with new expertise acquired, and taxonomies by definition are continuously altered according to new knowledge available.

spaces requires a basic understanding of the concept and practical skills to make effective use of the web technologies. Thus, the CoP assistants will conduct regular online training sessions with interested members. Moreover, the members will be offered exercises to use of the tools along with some exemplary tasks prepared by the assistants. Sessions will be offered continuously during the lifetime of the project. The dates will be circulated to CoP members. Last but not least, the platform moderators give active support to members in case of technical problems or issues encountered during the use of the DISCUSS platform and tools. The platform moderators will be recruited from the partner consortium.

2.1.2 Rules

The general rules comprise the legal terms under which a person is allowed to participate in the DISCUSS activities, and the official platform policies, which govern the community activities and detail the requirements for joining the community, the style of communication between participants, accepted conduct, and repercussions for non-conformance. Further rules can be established by community owners and administrators / moderators of discussion groups. The establishment and enforcement of the community rules is a basic prerequisite for establishing trust within the community. A set of basic rules (e.g. filtering of abusive or violating content) are being directly implemented and enforced in the platform.

2.1.3 Member profiles

Member profiles describe the community participants in terms of personal characteristics. Recording and, in particular, visualization of participants' features helps them to build and present an identity in the community. Information about participants is a basic prerequisite for promoting ongoing interaction. Participants must be able to recognize one another and to meet again. Furthermore, for a VCoP it is of utmost importance that members can obtain information about what other members are interested in, learn about their experience and expertise in a certain domain and identify possible connections to one's own field of work.

However, every member is unique and the profile should reflect this fact. Thus, the DISCUSS profile page shows the members' answers to the questions put when creating the profile, status posts, a list of friends, photos and videos, and any applications they choose to include. The member information is gathered through registration, with a view to the questions that are important to the DISCUSS community. From the common profile users can be asked something more relevant to the VCoP,

and members can find each other based on various criteria, such as expertise, field of interest, project involvement etc. However, from the discussions with community experts we also learned, that there is a certain risk that excessive information requests during the registration process may discourage potential subscribers and finally keep them from becoming members. As an interim solution, new subscribers are requested to indicate their preferred fields of interest.

The members from everywhere inside the community can initiate queries and identify members with related interests in a domain or topic of lifelong learning. Moreover, matching criteria can be combined, such as personal interests in a theme with geographical coverage or preferred conversation language.

The DISCUSS platform allows for maximum flexibility at the creation of individual profile types. For instance, project actors may be asked for member information different to that of stakeholders or researchers. Members can create multi-user profiles, allowing them to switch between different modes of communication. This feature in particular is important in order to ensure participation in both dimensions, collaboration through formal roles and informal interaction with colleagues and friends.

2.1.4 Common language

As argued earlier, common language, is a delimiting feature of a community and foundation for common meaning. For example, a set of acknowledged definitions, principles and rules established towards the validation of informal learning represents a simple model of the domain of discourse and fosters mutual understanding. The DISCUSS partners actually are elaborating the conceptual ground for a cloud-based wiki, which shall allow for bringing together knowledge gained from discussions in a glossary format.

Moreover, members in discussions and comments can add emoticons, in order to facilitate the understanding of the message exchanged. The upcoming release of the DISCUSS platform also will support hashtags, which represent metadata tags that allow for the grouping of similarly tagged messages, and for searches to return all messages that contain it.

2.1.5 Community management

The community management comprises of 7 elements:

1. **Strategy.** Establishing and executing the strategy for developing the community. Collecting data. Analyzing data. Establishing strategy. Developing action plan. Communicating the strategy and action plan. Project managing.

2. **Growth.** Increasing active membership of the community and convert newcomers into regulars. Direct marketing, promotion, referral/word-of-mouth. Optimize membership life-cycle funnel.
3. **Content.** Creating, editing, facilitating, and soliciting content for the community. Create content about the community. Use recognition and social influence principles.
4. **Moderation.** Removing obstacles to participation and encourage members to make contributions. Initiate discussions, develop and refine guidelines, solicit contributions, highlight popular topics, remove the bad stuff.
5. **Events and activities.** Creating and facilitating events to keep members engaged. Initiate regular online and offline events, organize irregular online and offline events.
6. **Relationship and influence.** Building relationships with key members and gain influence within the community. Recruit and manage volunteers. Build and manage an insider group.
7. **User experience.** Improving the community platform and participation experience for members. Increase social density, remove redundant features, add new elements, and refine the design.

2.2 The DISCUSS Learning Approach

A fundamental question to the DISCUSS partnership was, how the project could support learning across projects, working in different domains or under different thematic strands of European education & training programs. Different to previous program generations, projects increasingly are supposed to actively collaborate on the overarching strategy of building a “European area of lifelong learning“ and the development of concrete applications for the policy instruments associated with this strategic goal.

In order to systematically approach this new condition, in-depth investigations were undertaken into the learning process of CoPs. On the background of the research findings it can be argued, that VCoPs will need to learn about each other and their ‘boundaries’, involve themselves in ‘knotworking’ to work through difficulties and use their third spaces to create their own new collectively focused ‘shared objects’ for new activities created through expansive learning. And, DISCUSS can play a crucial

role for the VCoPs in facilitating successful boundary crossing. It does this by creating, developing and propagating appropriate tools and helping the VCoPs employ them. In this way, DISCUSS facilitates the expansive learning in which the VCoP members will need to engage if they are to cohere, develop and sustain themselves (See Lesley Doyle, DISCUSS: Expansive Learning Approach, item 6b).

2.3 Employing a strategy of organic growth

There are three types of community growth: in communities of replenishment growth type new members do replace leaving members. On a long-enough time scale, a complete replacement of members might be possible. Whatsoever, new memberships ensure the long-term survival of the community. We find replenishment growth strategies in cases, where the number of members shall be kept constant in order to avoid loss of identity. Conversely, communities of expansion type are expected to deliberately grow fast beyond current numbers. Early in a community, expansion helps reach a critical mass of activity. Expansion can also help the community adapt to a change in the broader eco-system (if the current interest is fading) or it might be driven by the ambitions of members to grow bigger or be seen in a certain light. Expansion growth strategies however are adopted as response to extraordinary events or activities inside or outside the community: specific growth for a specific reason. Finally, organic growth is growth which in mature state is not directly stimulated by the organization/community manager. New memberships arise from referral or mentioning of the community in other channels or word-of-mouth recommendation, rather than being invited by the community management.

Organic growth can be mentioned the ideal passage of growth, because it supports self-organisation and self-sustaining reproduction. Following this, the DISCUSS communities of practice are planned to develop along with the concept of organic growth. To measure and control for organic growth lifecycle phases were defined (inception, establishment / maturity and sustainability phase), as well as criteria and indicators, which allow for continuous monitoring of the CoPs for organic growth (see Randolph Preisinger-Kleine: Indicators for organic growth of the DISCUSS CoPs, item 7b).

3 Design principles

DISCUSS is based on clear design principles and sound definition of the project workflow, both of which give the development process direction and focus. As for the design, the seven principles for „cultivating“ communities of practice were adopted (Wenger et al, 2002): 1. Design for evolution, 2. Open dialogue between inside and

outside perspectives, 3. Inviting different levels of participation, 4. Development of both public and private community spaces, 5. Focus on value, 6. Combination of familiarity and excitement, 7. Creating a rhythm for the community. However, the partnership will adapt these principles to the specific objectives of the DISCUSS CoPs.

As for the development of the CoPs a workflow method will be employed, which allows for a convenient and effective way of development. The overall workflow is divided into five sub-workflows, unit a) information processing and content management, unit b) animation and facilitation of the community, unit c) outreach activities, unit d) administration and management of the CoPs and unit e) maintenance and technical improvement of the CoP infrastructure.

3.1 DISCUSS model for the design and building of CoPs

Based on the growth model a roadmap towards the formation of starter CoPs has been developed. 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 were 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.

3.2 The 12 step process

A 12-step process 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 (the 12 step process is illustrated by the figure presented on next page). The subsequent figure shows how the two workflows (community and technical development) are integrated.

3.3 Design for evolution and organic growth

As we have seen before, CoPs hardly can be developed along with traditional methods of organisational design, or with regard to a set of concrete member roles and tasks, deliverables or results. Instead of that we have to grasp the growing of CoPs in relation to the potential created for mutual learning activities and learning opportunities emerging from this learning process. The learning process in DISCUSS is described along with the concept of expansive learning, which is available as a separate document.

Following Wenger the following factors have to be rendered into a common design for evolution, that is to arrange and combine the elements in a way that they contribute effectively to the organic evolution of a CoP.

- The community's focus on value. From the discussions which took place within our project group, and the feedback received from observers and supporters from outside the project, one might draw the conclusion that it is in particular value which is key to every community of practice. While the dynamic elements develop over time, value marks the starting point for every community of practice, that is when persons and organisations concretely ask, why they should become member of the community, and why they should spend time and effort on community activities.

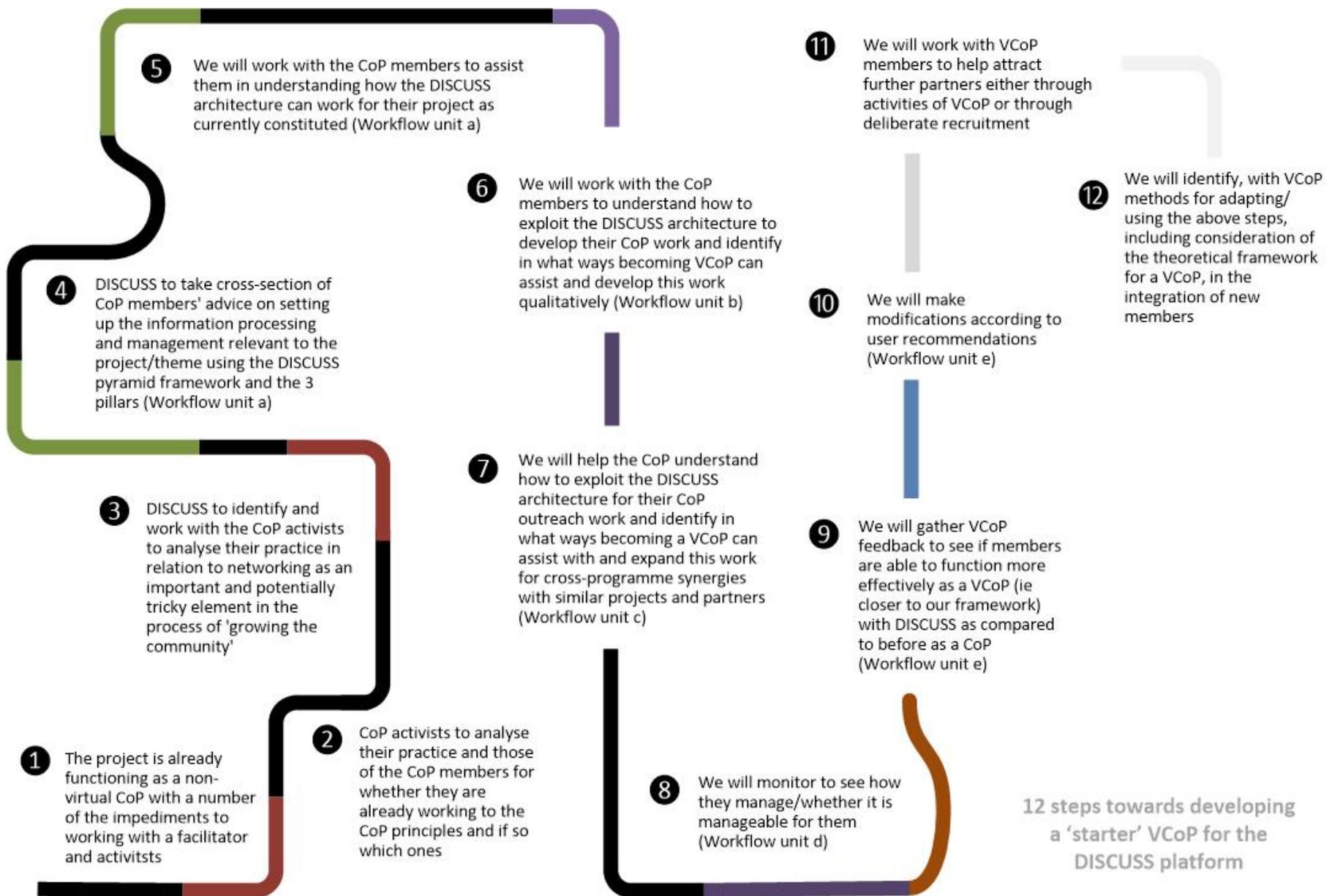


Figure 1: 12 step process

Integrating the 12 step process of building COPs with the development of the DISCUSS platform

Steps towards building starter VCoPs	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	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
Steps towards developing platform architecture and tools	Developing basic platform features Pre-alpha testing (developers)		Alpha testing of basic platform features (project partners)	Beta testing of pyramid architecture (project partners + VCoP activists)		
Steps towards building starter VCoPs	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	⑧ We will monitor to see how they manage / whether it is manageable for them (Workflow unit d)	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
Steps towards developing platform architecture and tools	Development of „boundary objects“ and tools to build „third spaces“ (developers)	Alpha-testing of platform features related to „boundary objects“ and „third spaces“ (project partners)	Beta testing of platform features related to „boundary objects“ and „third spaces“ (project partners + VCoP activists)	Final improvement of platform features and adjust conceptual framework towards expanding the DISCUSS community		

Figure 2: Integration of workflows

When listening to the DISCUSS peers, it showed that a major obstacle towards the start-off of a CoP might be to render visible their full value to the members. Value not seldomly is gauged with respect to current problems and needs and immediate pay-offs, while values which develop over a longer range of time, are not apparent to newbies. The value created by CoPs, far from being a self-evident outcome to everyone, therefore requires promotion, awareness raising, and continuous efforts to increase its visibility, including regular assessments.⁴

However, even if persons appreciate their engagement in a CoP as meaningful and valuable for their daily work⁵, they are typically members of organisations, and thus rely on the active support of employers, supervisors, team mates and colleagues etc. Organisations may not value participation in CoPs in general, or see it as peripheral and negligible, and thus do not provide their staff with the resources needed for community engagement. This aspect will be further investigated during the testing period.

It has been pointed out, that CoPs generate a broad range of pay-offs from tangible to intangible, for organisations as well as for their individual members. DISCUSS is targeting at CoPs developing from projects and related activities taking place within European program schemes. The following table shows the added value created by the DISCUSS CoPs, both, an aggregate and individual level. The DISCUSS team has taken the overall importance of value into account when designing the frontpage of the platform. First time visitors of the web platform are offered teaser-like information on the personal and professional value they could create from becoming a community member. By clicking the button: *Why should I become part of the community?* visitors in a lightbox are shown the following opportunities for value creation:

- You can share your ideas, expertise and project results with the community.
- It is an easy way to get connected with educators, learners, researchers, project actors and stakeholders relevant for your area of work.
- And, it's a great opportunity to transform your ideas into concrete collaborations and projects - all with the help of a vibrant community.

⁴ Etienne Wenger, Beverly Trayner, Maarten de Laat (2011) Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: a conceptual framework, Ruud de Moor Centrum, Netherlands.

⁵ Gilbert Probst, Stefano Borzillo (2008) Why communities of practice succeed and why they fail, in: European Management Journal (2008) 26, 335– 347.

DISCUSS
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Value created by the DISCUSS community on individual and aggregate level			
Short term value		Long term value	
For individual members of the Community of Practice	For the Lifelong Learning Community as a whole	For individual members of the Community of Practice	For the Lifelong Learning Community as a whole
Improved experience of work	Increased visibility and relevance of project results	Foster professional development	Emergence of strategic capacities for dissemination and exploitation
Help with challenges, share tips and good practice	Identification of problems and issues of common interest	Expanding skills and expertise by learning from others' experience	Increased transparency of local needs for educational goods and geographically distributed learner communities
Access to information, expertise, and good practice developed in lifelong learning initiatives and projects	Quick answers to urgent questions	Enhanced professional reputation through visibility and recognition within the wider lifelong learning community	Capacity for building knowledge-based alliances between stakeholders in lifelong learning
Confidence in one's approach to problems	Reduced transaction costs through visibility of potential clients, experts and development partners	Increased marketability and employability through professional profile	Emergence of unplanned capabilities
Fun of being with friends and colleagues from different parts of Europe	More perspectives on problems	Strong sense of professional identity	Capacity to take advantage of newly emerging opportunities and initiate strategic collaboration
Sense of belonging to the wider community of Lifelong Learning	Building of shared knowledge resources		Increased ability to foresee new developments in lifelong learning
	Increased quality of discussion and collaboration, through emergence of common standards		
	Development of non-conventional and creative solutions		
	Preventing "reinvention of the wheel"		

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- Ownership and transformative capacities. In every community we will find a tension between developing a sense of ownership and the openness to new ideas and people. Communities develop a sense of ownership of their domain, they take pride in the ideas they have developed and in the actions they take. Therefore there is a tendency that communities try to “defend” their boundaries, and new members feel less ownership of the topics, practices and processes, and there is a certain risk that the community doesn’t grow organically. The project during the test phase will monitor the development of ownership and sense of community, and contrast the findings with the overall strategy of organic growth. However, ownership is key towards building a collective identity, that is a sense of belonging to the CoP. CoPs build on a shared identity, making them different to other types of communities and social relations. They employ boundaries, a domain of knowledge and expertise, a specific community culture and shared practice. Thus first time visitors of the DISCUSS web platform are offered teaser-like information making them aware of the specific identity of the DISCUSS community. By clicking the button: Who are the people active in this community? visitors in a lightbox are shown the following information:
 - People, who on the background of their professional activities are concerned with subjects and topics related to Lifelong Learning,
 - those who are engaged in European initiatives and projects with a life-long learning dimension,
 - and those who are interested in the results of these projects and would like to benefit from them.
 - Synergies and potentials for improvement gained from dialogue between inside and outside perspectives. This aspect in DISCUSS has been covered in two directions: Firstly, the platform is built to interact with other social networks, which allows to import aspects and perspectives, not emerged from within the DISCUSS CoPs. Conversely, the DISCUSS members may share contributions they have made within the DISCUSS community with persons active in other social / professional communities. Secondly, “the initial themes (of the DISCUSS CoPs) 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.” (Lesley Doyle, Formation of a ‘starter’ VCoP for the DISCUSS platform).

Wenger points to the fact, that “effective community design is built on the collective experience of community members. Only an insider can appreciate the issues at the heart of the domain, the knowledge that is important to share, the challenges their field faces, and the latent potential in emerging ideas and techniques. Only an insider can know who the real players are and their relationships. This requires more than community input. It requires a deep understanding of the community issues.” The DISCUSS team has taken this fundamental requirement into consideration when building the moderator and facilitator concept. Both types of community „supporters“ are thought to play a key role in the DISCUSS concept. Moderators and facilitators will be recruited according to their position and connectedness within existing networks of lifelong learning. This approach on one hand ensures that the community builds on existing links of collaboration, rather than grounds without correspondent reality.

- different levels of participation, allowing for the inclusion of a broad range of community activities from peripheral to core and, the integration of different member interests. People participate in communities for different reasons—some because the community directly provides value, some for the personal connection, and others for the opportunity to improve their skills. This diversity of motivations and interests is systematically reflected in the overall architecture of the DISCUSS platform. DISCUSS members can choose to receive information about educational projects or news from the Lifelong Learning Community, engage in collaborative action or just take part in the social life without any further engagement in professional activities.

We commonly see three main levels of community participation. The first is a small core group of people who actively participate in discussions, even debates, in the public community forum. They often take on community projects, identify topics for the community to address, and move the community along its learning agenda. This group is the heart of the community. As the community matures, this core group takes on much of the community's leadership, its members becoming auxiliaries to the community coordinator. But this group is usually rather small, only 10 to 15 percent of the whole community. At the next level outside this core is the active group. These members attend meetings regularly and participate occasionally in the community forums, but without the

regularity or intensity of the core group. The active group is also quite small, another 15 to 20 percent of the community.

- the availability of both, public and private community spaces, allowing for formal and informal exchange between the members of the community, divergent thinking and activities, and the incubation of new and innovative, but fragmentary ideas without immediate repercussion.

Quite often we found the situation, that projects had developed complementary expertise in an area or domain of a project, which however remained invisible due to missing mechanisms for the identification of themes and topics of common interest, knowledge sharing and discussion with experts and stakeholders active in the same area, and the development of collaborative action in a specific area of interest. As a consequence, synergies could not be created and some major issues touched in the course of projects remained unsolved. The DISCUSS project proposes to overcome this unsatisfactorily situation, and develop communities of practice helping to bridge this gap by bringing together project actors, experts, stakeholders, decision makers and end users in a collaborative environment.

Moreover, our experience is that the exploitation of project results could be enormously pushed by CoPs, since many projects miss the means and channels to address major target groups, such as stakeholders in education and decision makers. CoPs are a promising way to support LLL project actors to meet these persons in a context, appropriate for making contacts aside of “official routes”, presenting project ideas and results to a wider audience of interested parties, and discuss major issues and topics directly with end users.

- well balanced combination of familiarity and excitement, and the ability to create a rhythm for the community

The partnership during the second year will develop a range of activities to create excitement and rhythm for the community. For instance, it is intended to implement weekly debates, that is to select two people with different views on a topical issue and let them debate the issue throughout the week. Each side is offered opening remarks, they are then each allowed a few hundred words to respond to the other (evidence is good here). Throughout the week, members can contribute their own opinions.

For the community, the opportunities here are interesting. First, the moderators of the debate can reward the most active members. The moderators could also invite influencers that are likely to refer others to join. Moreover, exciting debates positions the community on the cutting edge of the major issues. This

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may increase growth and the level of activity. It's also an event which members can look forward to each week, suggest debate topics, put themselves forward, and review the history of debates.