

# Preface

This book profiles higher education Communities of Practice (CoPs) created and sustained by staff and students who dream of building dynamic communities where individual and community social learning is explored, challenged, shared and grown, within a vibrant, supportive environment. Such a dream requires informed and sustained scheming; firstly to establish the community, then to sustain member engagement and secure institutional support. This book complements a companion book, also edited by Jacquie McDonald and Aileen Cater-Steel *Communities of Practice—Facilitating Social Learning in Higher Education*, published by Springer. The two books are the result of the marvellous response of 69 submissions to the initial call for proposals, demonstrating the impressive scope and interest in higher education CoPs. The wide geographic reach of the contents of this book is indicated by the fact that the 76 contributing authors represent 10 countries (Australia, Canada, Germany, India, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, UK, and USA).

Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner say that the term ‘community of practice’ is fairly recent, although the phenomenon it refers to is age-old (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). As they articulate in the foreword of this book, community of practice theory is informed by, and informs, social learning theory (Bandura 1977). CoPs have gone through three phases, giving different perspectives on ‘what is a community of practice’ as the theory evolves through the different phases. CoP theory now seems well established (Tight 2015; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015) with a well-accepted definition used in this book. It is one to which most of the authors explicitly or implicitly subscribe, that Communities of Practice are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion about something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) also say that the three characteristics, the domain, the community and the practice, are the three essential elements that constitute a CoP. These elements; building the domain of knowledge, creating a community of people, and sharing practice were initially presented in Etienne Wenger’s 1998 seminal book, ‘Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity’. These elements have been successfully adapted

in the Australian Higher Education context as the organizing structure for a range of topic and cohort CoPs (McDonald and Star 2008, 2014; McDonald n.d.).

Defining what CoPs are, and are not, provides a perspective to explore how CoPs are useful as an approach to knowing and learning in higher education. Many CoPs operate outside and across formal institutional structures such as faculty, discipline teams, individual course offers, and, what is sometimes perceived as the academic and professional staff divide.

The three different types of higher education CoPs identified in an Australian study (McDonald et al. 2012) were organic, nurtured or supported, and created or intentional. The research from that study found that members and/or facilitators may have intentionally set out to establish a CoP, or ‘discovered’ that they had created a CoP. Once they recognized that they were operating as a CoP, they were able to view the CoP activities through that particular lens, bringing an informed focus and understanding to past and future CoP activities. The CoP research and practice presented by the chapter authors will provide readers with such a lens to view how CoPs operate within different contexts. The chapters provide alternative perspectives to reflect on, and inform their own CoP activities.

Much has been written about the ‘chilly climate’ in higher education, which does not support collaborative activities; and about the changing role of academics, as government, institutional and student expectations are influenced by the corporatization of higher education. Palmer (2002, p. 179) noted that *academic culture is infamous for fragmentation, isolation, and competitive individualism, with no sense of being part of a community*. Changing educational and government expectations, and student demographics is also increasing pressure on staff as they are required to increase research output, teach diverse student cohorts, all with reduced administrative support, and increasing accountability and productivity requirements. There are also changes to the traditional autonomy and the identity of academic staff, away from what is retrospectively viewed as a ‘collegial’ past, towards a more managerial and commercial entity, with efficiency and output measurements, and top down compliance audits (Probert 2014). The result is an intensification of academic work, a decline in collegiality and feelings of alienation and stress. Despite the changing context and ‘chilly climate’, higher education staff and students have created ways to share and enhance learning through communities of practice. In Chap. 4 Knowles talks about CoPs building cultures of collegiality that are largely absent in academic life.

The chapter authors in this book share their experiences as they dream and scheme to create and sustain their Communities of Practice. The chapters have a more practical focus than the companion book *Communities of Practice—Facilitating Social Learning in Higher Education*. The chapters provide examples and case studies from students and educator perspectives, with examples of CoP implementation in both the sciences and humanities disciplines, CoPs supporting change initiatives, curriculum development and virtual communities.

The twenty-seven chapters of this book are collected in four parts:

Part I—Profiles of Higher Education Communities of Practice: Case studies

Part II—Communities of Practice—Curriculum Development

Part III—Student focused Communities of Practice

Part IV—Virtual Communities of Practice in Higher Education

An overview of each chapter is provided at the being of each part. We invite you to explore the different types of CoPs, their application in different contexts and foci, and share the challenges and triumphs presented by the contributing authors. It is our intention that the experiences detailed here may provide guidance to existing and future CoP facilitators and members in the Higher Education sector. The stories and case studies reflect the tremendous energy and tenacity of the chapter authors, as they ‘scheme and dream’ to ensure the success of their CoPs, despite the challenges of corporatization and intensification of academic work. There are opportunities for exploration into CoP activities in locations not represented in this book, such as Asian and African countries, and the role CoPs can play in digital education such as MOOCS. There is also an increasing trend of self-managed learning that takes place outside traditional institutions. How universities and CoPs support these independent learning journeys, and the social learning supported by ever changing digital media, is an interesting space for future activities and research. We look forward to sharing such research with members, leaders, and the schemers and dreamers of higher education communities of practice future CoP research and learnings. As a celebration of the inspiring CoP activities outlined by the authors we finish by sharing a (slightly modified) favourite quote from Henry David Thoreau (Levin 2003, p. 235).

*Go confidently in the directions of your dreams,  
Live the life (CoP) you imagined.*

## **Book Development Process**

A double-blind review process was used for all chapters submitted to the editors. Authors of selected chapters were invited to act on the reviewer’s comments and resubmit their chapters to the editors. Chapters were checked and final revisions applied.

We have enjoyed the process of compiling these books and in particular working with the contributors who provided such wide-ranging contributions about Communities of Practice and Social Learning in Higher Education contexts. It is up to you, the reader, to decide whether the perspectives offered here are relevant to your research or practical application of CoPs in your context. We would be

delighted to hear your feedback on the usefulness of these books. You are invited to contribute to the dedicated ‘Books’ page at the Communities of Practice Higher Education blog—<https://jacquiemcdonald.com/books/>.

## Disclaimers

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## Acknowledgements

The authors who contributed to this book deserve our heartfelt thanks for their contribution, patience, and cooperation throughout the long and complex process of compiling this book. All the contributors are listed with biographical details in the book.

The reviewers also played an essential role and we know the authors were very appreciative of the valuable comments provided by the reviewers. We sincerely thank the reviewers for taking the time to read and comment on the original submissions. These contributions were an essential ingredient necessary to improving the content and presentation of the chapters.

Thank you also to Etienne and Bev Wenger-Trayner for providing the thought-provoking Foreword for the book. Their leadership and contribution to Communities of Practice and Social Learning is widely acclaimed.

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Finally, we dedicate this book to Aileen’s grandchildren, Bea and Pippa, and to the inspirational leaders of Communities of Practice, Etienne and Bev Wenger-Trayner and Faculty Learning Communities, Milt Cox, CoP fellow travellers, and Jacquie’s husband Bob Willis.

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Dreamers and Schemers

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