

# Preface

Recognition of the positive impact of Communities of Practice and increased opportunities for social learning across discipline, national and international boundaries has seen growing interest in Communities of Practice in higher education. The authors in this book articulate the theoretical foundations of Communities of Practice (CoPs), the research into their application in higher education, CoP leadership roles and how CoPs sustain and support professional learning. The theoretical and leadership focus of this book provides the foundation for, and is complemented by, a companion book, *Implementing Communities of Practice in Higher Education: Dreamers and Schemers*, also edited by Jacquie McDonald and Aileen Cater-Steel, and published by Springer. The companion book has a more practical focus with examples and case studies of both student and academic CoPs, applications in sciences or humanities, curriculum development and virtual communities. 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 there are contributions from 71 authors from seven countries (Australia, Canada, Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, UK, and USA). This is an indication of the extent and impact of higher education CoPs.

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 which most of the authors explicitly or implicitly subscribe to, 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 of academic staff and the identity of higher education 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. The authors in this book share their experiences as they articulate the theoretical foundations of Communities of Practice (CoPs) and its relevance in higher education; research their application in higher education; the CoP leadership roles and how CoPs can sustain and support professional learning in higher education.

The twenty-eight chapters of this book are collected in four themes, with an overview of each chapter is provided at the beginning of each part:

Part I—Theoretical Underpinnings Informing Communities of Practice  
Part II—Research of Higher Education Communities of Practice  
Part III—Leadership in Higher Education Communities of Practice  
Part IV—Communities of Practice Sustaining Professional Learning and Development.

In conclusion, while we cannot be expert in all areas of CoP activities, through exploring the workings of other CoPs we can challenge our thinking and deepen our knowledge about CoPs. The authors' stories and research will inform our practice and how our own CoPs are positioned within national and international CoP activities. The authors raise, and, through their CoP initiatives, address opportunities and issues faced by all higher education leaders and educators. These include how CoP theory and practice aligns with, and can leverage on, evolving social learning theory, social media, changing community and learner expectations, and the fostering of personal learning journeys within, and outside, traditional higher education institutions. As well as these complex issues and opportunities, further research and practice will inform matters such as the impact of allegiance to own disciplines, boundary crossing.

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.

## **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 in contributing to your Community of Practice activities

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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Toowoomba, Australia

Jacquie McDonald  
Aileen Cater-Steel

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