

## Can CoP theory be applied? Exploring praxis in a Community of Practice on gender

*Arwen Bailey*

### Introduction

The concept of Communities of Practice has been around now for about twenty years since it was coined in 1997 (Brown and Duguid 1998). CoPs are ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger et al 2002:4). Knowledge is a key resource in any organization, and Communities of Practice are places where work-specific knowledge can be generated, shared and leveraged to support strategic objectives. Unlike work teams or other management structures, CoPs follow the flow of what people do naturally every day – discussing and improving practices they are passionate about. On the other hand, unlike friendship groups, CoPs have a more formal form, structuring conversations more purposefully and making sure that the current of conversation and idea-making is periodically ‘reified’<sup>i</sup> so that lessons can be learned and a repertoire of practices built up (Wenger 1998). CoPs are safe spaces where practitioners can share and generate knowledge and bring forth ‘implicit knowledge’ through conversations and network-building, thus supporting continued professional development and learning in an area of practice (Roberts 2015).

CoP theory as a focus of academic practice began with Lave and Wenger (1991), and then was widely popularized through Etienne Wenger’s book in 1998 *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. The early works were descriptive and analytical. They observed the phenomenon of situated learning and sought to distil a theory from these observations. With a focus on knowledge sharing soon after Knowledge Management had been set up as a discipline (1991 according to Wikipedia) just as the Internet was transforming communications in the mid-1990s, and in the context of the do-more-with less political environment of the 1990s, CoPs were instantly appealing to many organizations and a spate of articles followed with the aim to guide the reader into how to cultivate, nurture or steward a CoP (Coakes and Clarke 2006, Corso et al 2008, Cox 2005, Dubé et al 2003, McDermott 2000, 2003, 2004, Rogers 2000, Smith and Trayner 2005, Wenger et al 2002).

This paper takes these papers as a starting point. It uses the concept of ‘praxis’ (enactment of a theory, or melding of theory and practice) to explore what happens if you follow the recommendations derived from evidence. Wenger described his theory of learning, as identified in communities of practice, as a ‘perspective’: ‘A perspective is not a recipe; it does not tell you just what to do. Rather it acts as a guide about what to pay attention to, what difficulties to expect, and how to approach problems.’ (Wenger 1998:9). It has been noted that ‘It is still not apparent to what extent a CoP can be created purposefully through ‘design’ whether from scratch or through harnessing nascent CoPs’ (Iaquinto et al 2011:5). The author enacted the theory of

communities of practice in order to cultivate a CoP, following the evidence-based guidance offered by the literature to see how it played out in practice. This paper is, therefore, a personal commentary and observations on the experience of cultivating a CoP informed by the literature. This can be seen as a small contribution to validation of the social theory of communities of practice.

## **Context**

Bioversity International is an international organization engaged in research into agricultural biodiversity, which aims to have development outcomes such as improved diets, more sustainable agriculture and the maintenance in posterity of biodiversity for food and agriculture. Since the work is about development, it has a strong social element. Gender relationships are important in much of the research portfolio: the different skills, aspirations, knowledge and norms of men and women managing agricultural biodiversity in different contexts, how they intersect with age, economic status, education, ethnicity, religion and so on. Despite this importance, for historical reasons most staff hail from biophysical backgrounds and there are but few social scientists. In 2012, under the guidance of a collaborative global programme on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry, Bioversity conducted a scoping study on gender-sensitive research. The study was carried out with scientific staff and other collaborators between August and December 2012 in Bogor, Cali, Montpellier, Ouagadougou, Rome and Yaoundé. One recommendation from the study was to ‘strengthen gender-responsiveness institutionally by ... [building] a Community of Practice within Bioversity with multi-disciplinary participation and representation from each of the programs and regional offices’ (Fernandez 2012).

This paper documents the journey of ‘nurturing’ or ‘cultivating’ that CoP into being. The author was freshly graduated from the Open University in a MSc in Systems Thinking in Practice, with a particular focus on social learning systems and communities of practice. She therefore took the decision to apply CoP practice as outlined in the literature to see how it actually worked in practice.

## **Method**

I conducted a review of the literature on the recommendations for a successful Community of Practice. While the concepts in Wenger’s original analysis (1998) were much more wide ranging and complex (e.g. considerations of identity, participation and reification, participation, locality and boundaries, engagement, alignment, imagination), most analyses now follow the simplified structural model from Wenger et al (2002) - with three essential elements: domain, community and practice - to explore and structure analyses and action:

- Domain of knowledge which defines a set of issues
- Community of people who care about this domain
- Shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain (Wenger et al 2002).

The literature suggests that CoPs pass through similar stages (Cambridge et al 2005, McDermott 2003, Wenger et al 2002), so the first step was to situate ourselves along those stages in order to

inform activities. Table 1 identifies issues typical of each stage of communities of practice (Wenger 2002, in Ison et al 2014).

*Table 1. Issues typical of each stage of communities of practice*

Stage	Theme	Domain	Community	Practice
1. Potential	Discovering common ground	Seeing your real passion as worthy	Finding enough potential members to imagine a community	Understanding what knowledge is valuable to share and develop
2. Coalescing	Finding value	Establishing the value of the domain	Developing relationships, trust and rhythm	Helping each other, sharing tips, solving problems
3. Maturing	Building communal value	Placing the domain in context	Expanding the membership	Establishing standard practice and setting a learning agenda
4. Stewardship	Taking responsibility	Achieving influence and ongoing relevance	Balancing intimacy and openness	Remaining world class
5. Legacy	Leaving something behind	Understanding new circumstances	Closing gracefully and seeing new trajectories	Recasting the practice into a legacy

Source: Wenger 2002, in Ison et al 2014

An alternative, but similar, set of phases are presented in Cambridge et al (2005): Inquire, Design, Prototype, Launch, Grow, Sustain. For simplicity's sake, I shrank the steps down to four main ones: Define, Design, Grow and Sustain. I considered Bioversity's Gender CoP to be near the beginning of the phases, somewhere between potential and coalescing. It was not starting from scratch, as the scoping study had established the passion as worthy, and there were 30 or so people who had expressed interest in participating in a community. A few of these were already quite aware of, or even champions for, gender issues. The next step was to decide what actions to take, and this meant diving into the research on the Define and Design stages.

## **Define**

In the early stages, it is important to establish the purpose of the CoP (Cambridge et al 2005). I sent a questionnaire to all potential members to explore the goals and vision that they hoped to achieve by being engaged in this community. But who were 'all potential members'? It is essential to think carefully about who to involve. Boundaries of a CoP are critically important;

too small and you lose the critical mass needed to generate creative conversations, too large and it can lose focus on its purpose. In our case, we decided that we couldn't pre-judge staff's interest in the subject and we sent it to all staff, regardless of role in the institute in Spring 2015. Of about 300 staff, 55 participated. The survey sought to get a picture of: current levels of expertise in gender-responsive research and in participatory research; what respondents would like to do and what they would like to achieve through engaging in the community; their vision of success in five years' time for themselves and for the group as a whole, and levels of interest in joining a core, organizing group.

The questionnaire showed that though people were interested, the levels of expertise (i.e. practice) were quite low (Figure 1). No one rated their experience as high (5), while a quarter rated it as 'no experience'. This was an interesting design challenge, since CoPs are premised on the fact that they have a common practice. There was, however, more experience reported in participatory research (Figure 1), implying an experience-base that could be tapped into, even though there are important distinctions between participatory research and gender-responsive research (Cornwall 2003).

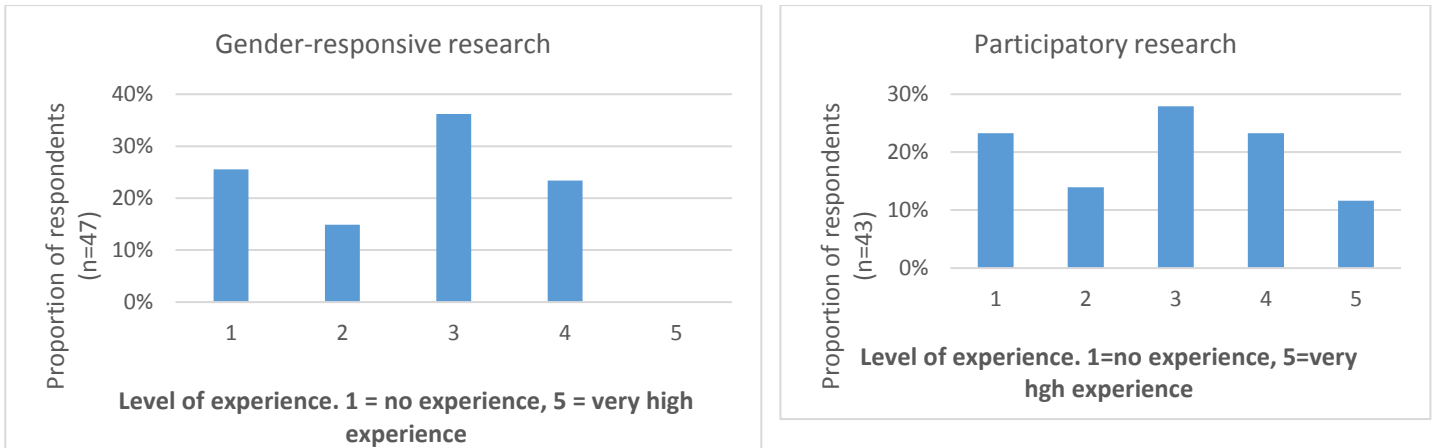


Figure 1. Summary of questionnaire responses on levels of previous experience with respect to gender-responsive research (left) and participatory research (right).

Other useful information from the questionnaire was participants' visions of success. Asked about the change they would like to see as individuals in five years' time, responses could be categorized into three levels: personal skills, confidence and knowledge about tools and approaches; supporting the institute by collaborating more with colleagues; and improving research programme and impact level (e.g. creating more value for communities we conduct research with, tackling inequity). As a vision of what would have changed for the institute as a whole if successful in five years' time, responses fell into five categories:

- Bioersity International is seen differently: Hub of excellence, recognition, visibility, leader, key workstream, credibility, presence

- Individuals' practice is improved: capacity and skills, information flow, collaboration, cooperation, continuous improvement, gender integrated, tool kit, fact sheet, case studies, support
- Bioversity's practice as an institution is improved: in projects and in organizational decision-making, strategic choice of R4D partners/networks, social scientists integrated, gender-responsive interventions the norm
- Community members are supporting each other: Sharing data online, aggregating and presenting results; indicators and monitoring with a baseline and progress, assessing of methods, tools, etc.
- Impacts are improved: equitable outcomes of projects, gender equity, inclusive livelihood development, diversity in decision-making, food systems, ecosystems and genebanks; gender-just agriculture.

The needs analysis allowed us to DEFINE the profile of the nascent community of practice on gender-responsive research:

- Domain: to improve practice, visibility and collaboration in order to achieve more equitable and inclusive outcomes in our research
- Community: a group of approximately 50 people interested in interacting – with 37 Scientists of every level, and 13 support staff of all types; 20 people at HQ, and 31 distributed in locations across the world; 24 women and 16 men.
- Practice: collaborations for designing gender-responsive and/or collaborative research, sharing ideas and experiences about them, discussing and recommending how to improve the institute's gender-responsiveness and sharing and accessing each other's research results.

## Design

At this point I turned again to the literature for design. There is a very rich literature on steps, success factors, commandments and reasons for failure, which can be used to create, build, cultivate or nurture a CoP. Representative key publications are summarized in Table 2. Cambridge et al (2005) outline key questions to explore and activities to engage in in the different phases of CoP development (listed in the Table are the key questions from the Design stage). McDermott (2000) lists ten critical success factors divided into challenges at four levels: management, the community, technical and personal. Wenger et al. distil seven principles for cultivating a community of practice, while Probst and Borzillo (2008) provide ten commandments for success, and five reasons for failure to avoid. Iaquinto et al (2011) identify from an empirical study in a government department in Australia six factors which contribute to success of CoPs.

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Publication	Community of Practice Design Guide Cambridge, Kaplan and Suter (2005)	Knowing in Community: 10 Critical Success Factors in Building Communities of Practice McDermott (2000)	<i>Cultivating Communities of Practice</i> Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002)	Why Communities of Practice Succeed and Why They Fail Probst and Borzillo (2008)	Creating communities of practice: scoping purposeful design Iaquinto et al (2011)
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<p>Recommendations and factors to consider</p>	<p><b>Activities:</b> What kinds of activities will generate energy and support the emergence of community presence? What will the community's rhythm be?  <b>Communication:</b> How will members communicate on an ongoing basis to accomplish the community's primary purpose?  <b>Interaction:</b> What kinds of interactions (with each other and with the content of the community) will generate energy and engagement?  <b>Learning:</b> What are the learning goals of the community, and how can collaborative learning be supported?  <b>Knowledge Sharing:</b> What are the external resources (people, publications, reports, etc.) that will support the community during its initial</p>	<p><b>Management Challenge</b>  1. Focus on topics important to the business and community members.  2. Find a well-respected community member to coordinate the community.  3. Make sure people have time and encouragement to participate.  4. Build on the core values of the organization.  <b>Community Challenge</b>  5. Get key thought leaders involved.  6. Build personal relationships among community members.  7. Develop an active passionate core group.  8. Create forums for thinking together as well as systems</p>	<p><b>Seven principles for cultivating communities of practice</b>  1. Design for evolution  2. Open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives  3. Invite different levels of participation  4. Develop both public and private community spaces  5. Focus on value  6. Combine familiarity and excitement  7. Create a rhythm for the community.</p>	<p><b>The 10 commandments of COP governance</b>  1. Stick to strategic objectives  2. Divide objectives into sub-topics  3. Form governance committees with sponsors and COP leaders  4. Have a sponsor and a COP leader who are 'best practice control agents'  5. Regularly feed the COP with external expertise  6. Promote access to other intra- and interorganizational networks  7. The COP leader must have a driver and promoter role  8. Overcome hierarchy-related pressures  9. Provide the sponsor with measurable performance  10. Illustrate results for COP members  <b>The main reasons for failure of cops</b>  1. Lack of a core group</p>	<p><b>Six factors contributing to success:</b>  1. Dispersal  2. Awareness of limitations  3. One coordinator  4. High level sponsor  5. Pre-existing social capital  6. Core business</p>
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<p>development? How will members share these resources and gain access to them? <b>Collaboration:</b> How will community members collaborate with each other to achieve shared goals? <b>Roles and Social Structures:</b> How will community roles be defined (individuals, groups, group leaders, community administrators, etc.) and who will take them on?</p>	<p>for sharing information. <b>Technical Challenge</b> 9. Make it easy to contribute and access the community's knowledge and practices. <b>Personal Challenge</b> 10. Create real dialogue about cutting edge issues</p>		<p>2. Lack of identification with the COP 3. Rigidity of competences 4. Low level of one-to-one interaction between members 5. Practice intangibility</p>	
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Table 2. Representative key publications and learnings about factors for a successful CoP

While the evidence-based recommendations in these publications are helpful, they are also a little overwhelming when taken together. Some of the advice is shared across several publications (involve internal and external people, establish a rhythm), while some is found only in one list (e.g. have a sponsor), but it is no less evidence based for that. For a practitioner wanting to nurture a new CoP, it is hard to know where to start in practical terms.

I began by establishing some principles and the purpose of the CoP. The principles were adapted from the literature, and were intended to build an atmosphere of trust in the community and make the desired modus operandi explicit.

<p><b>Design principles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants must have an interest in developing their competence in gender and participatory research</li> </ul>
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- Bring your ignorance. It must be a space where people are comfortable to expose their ignorance. No one is an expert. We are all people on a trajectory of increasing competence
- Bring your half-baked ideas. It is a learning space. Mistakes, naïve questions and knowledge gaps are welcome here.
- Feel free to critique the way we are conducting our gender and participatory research practice. And to look for solutions to make it better
- The CoP is a place where we seek to improve our practice in a practical way by sharing everyday problems, tools, developments in the field, things that work and things that don't, technical problems, specific problems with methods in the field.
- Participation is a gift to the other community members. Leverage what you know. Share it out – educate your colleagues, help someone, mentor someone with lower competence.
- Where we go depends on you. All members have responsibility for voicing what they would like to see as the value of the CoP.

*Box 1. Design principles for Bioversity's community of practice on gender-responsive research*

The community met and agreed on the principles and decided initial steps designed to develop the domain, the community and the practice. Members could: recommend activities and offer to take ownership of them; suggest subtopics under the domain (gender and climate change, gender and rural/urban livelihoods, etc.), and volunteer to support the development of the community (e.g. by creating a member directory). We also discussed the technological support to underpin the community activities (Wenger et al 2009). A large number of activities had been suggested by the literature (regular meetings, a member directory) and by the needs analysis.

## **Progress**

Now after almost two years, there are 65 members. Monthly meetings are being held and attended by about ten people each time, though the individuals vary. As expected by the literature, the membership finds itself in a split of about 10-15% core group, 15-20% frequent participators and the rest more peripheral (Wenger et al 2002). Subjects for meetings are usually suggested by the facilitator, based on research outputs or when hearing of interesting experiences. Meeting content, when relevant, is 'reified' into learning notes to act as an aide-memoire when planning or implementing future research projects. Occasionally CoP members will suggest topics. For the technical part a Google site was set up with a repository for CoP products (recorded seminars, learning notes, communications activities, publications) and a directory of community members (photo, name, expertise and gender interest). However, shortly afterwards the organization changed from Google to Microsoft 365, so this is now suspended until it can be transferred. In between meetings, community members frequently share information by email (upcoming webinars, publications) and have conversations about concepts and approaches concerning gender-responsive research. All new staff have an induction on the CoP and are invited to join. Products that have resulted from the community are: a series of success stories to aggregate and make visible the different strands of gender research being

conducted; a strategy for the institute as a whole on gender and social inclusion, and; many formal or informal presentations and discussions on research results, approaches and challenges.

## **Reflections on progress**

### **Supporting organizational goals**

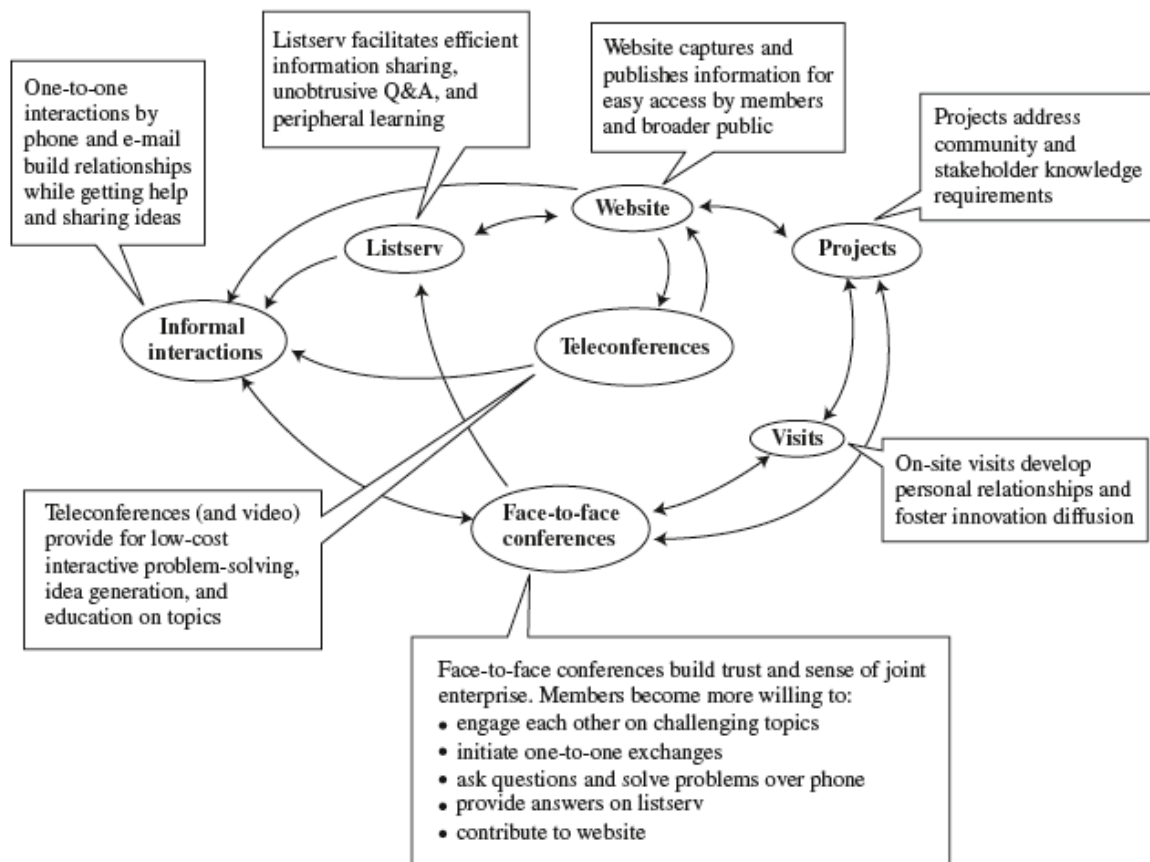
CoPs tend to be successful when they are encouraging learning about a topic that is core to the organization achieving its goals (Wenger and Snyder 2000, Wenger et al 2002, McDermott 2003, 2004). In a study on CoPs in a government department in Australia, the researchers found that the CoPs on evaluation and climate change were the most successful (Iaquinto et al 2011). They attributed the success to the characteristics of these topics: evaluators or climate change experts tend to be: (i) scattered among teams, (ii) few per team and (iii) reliant on each other for advice. Gender-responsive research may be seen to share these characteristics, since gender researchers are generally scattered in teams working on other subjects (e.g. renovation of forests, or understanding the role of marginalized crops in nutrition), there tend to be only one or two gender experts per team, and they cannot find advice on the subject within the research teams.

### **Leadership: distributed or concentrated, by subject experts or a coordinator**

Distributed leadership is suggested by several CoP scholars as being effective for better CoP facilitation, with different members taking on different roles (Cambridge et al 2005, Wenger and Trayner 2012). Other authors (Iaquinto et al 2011, Kala and Retna Pak Tee Ng 2011) report that participants prefer to have one facilitator to guide activities in the community. While the literature suggests that CoP leadership should be internal (McDermott 2000, Wenger 1998, Wenger 2000), it may be that in the case of deliberately established (as opposed to spontaneously emerging) CoPs people do not have time to do the required administration work or 'logistical grind' (Iaquinto et al. 2011). Competence in facilitation and leading a community is not necessarily a competence held by community members. The coordinator is a key role and takes a great deal of time (20-50% of working hours according to Wenger 2002). Iaquinto et al (2011) found that the role of coordinator was critical for the success of CoPs, because of the significant organizational and administrative load. They walk a fine line between fostering self-organization and taking control (Iaquinto et al 2011). Tasks include: 'updating mailing lists, organizing meetings, acting as the contact for members suggesting discussion topics, communicating relevant issues to the group and encouraging participation in meetings.' (Iaquinto et al 2011). Coordinators need not be content specialists, but may receive help from 'content coordinators' (Fontaine 2001 in Borzillo et al 2011) who serve as 'sources of explicit knowledge by searching, retrieving, transferring and responding to members' knowledge requests'. Other functions of a coordinator are: building practices by 'expanding the CoP knowledge base, recording lessons learned, best practices, developing tools and methods, promoting the CoP's value to the organization...' (Borzillo et al 2011). Our experience in Bioversity's Gender CoP gels with these analyses. We have found it useful to make a distinction between the CoP coordinator and knowledge experts. The coordinator has skills in administration, facilitation and social learning, and is literate in gender issues, while other CoP members have expertise in gender-responsive research.

### Establishing a rhythm and supporting it with appropriate technology

Much of the literature recommends establishing a rhythm or ‘heartbeat’ for the CoP in order to maintain momentum. We agreed on monthly meetings in a set slot. At first, it was difficult to find material and ideas to fill this monthly meeting, but after a year or so, it became easy, with the coordinator or members suggesting ideas for discussion. At the same time, community members share comments, materials, questions and opportunities by email between meetings. We are also sensitive to ad hoc opportunities to have additional interactions, such as discussions with visiting experts. It is starting to reflect the typical ecology of community learning activities as described by Snyder and Wenger (2010) (Figure 1). Roberts (2015) in a recent study of enablers and barriers among health practitioners in Canada, found that scheduled face-to-face meetings and encouragement to participate were more high value than having a database/knowledge system to fill in experiences and relevant knowledge. This resonates with the evolution of the Bioersivity CoP, in that the database/knowledge system that we sought to develop has never taken off, whereas scheduled meetings (albeit not face-to-face but by teleconference) have remained well attended. Wenger, White and Smith (2009) suggest that the level of technology should follow the community’s needs and comfort with different and new technologies. The group experimented with Yammer, and with the dedicated Google site for archiving documents, videos of seminars, and a member directory, but for needs and comfort, email seems sufficient for the moment.



*Figure 2. A typical ecology of community learning activities (Snyder and Wenger 2010). Used with permission.*

### **Activities: what we thought we wanted to do and what we really want to do**

Cambridge et al (2005) ask: What kinds of activities will generate energy and support the emergence of community presence? When asked that question the community members came up with a long list of potential activities that they were interested in, from pulling together case studies, to organizing a reading group, organizing a mentoring scheme, developing a tool kit, and collaborating on a project proposal. While the list was impressive and ownership was established in name, in reality none of the activities got off the ground. Some started and then gradually ran to a halt, others did not start at all. The early activities were what we *thought* we wanted – explicit learning activities such as mentoring and summary sheets of key literature for example. As time has gone by it has emerged that more implicit learning activities are preferred – e.g. focused conversations about research methods and results. Conversations are facilitated with some members together in a meeting room and others online. They are warm and informal and simple protocols are followed, such as always introducing the members who come to meetings, where they are based and what they are working on. A turning point in the quality of conversation came when one scientist asked if she could use a meeting to discuss gender-responsive options in the analysis of her research data. From that meeting, conversations have been increasingly focused on problem solving and sharing methodologies and less on sharing results. This experience is reflected in the findings by Roberts (2015), which found that ‘high value’ (as defined by members) CoP activities were meetings with discussions, talks about experiences, brainstorming to find solutions to problems and exchanging emails to find solutions to problems rather than workshops or report or proposal writing.

### **Being strategic**

One of the main issues has been the tension between supporting the CoP to add value to the organization’s core business of research and the informal and voluntary nature of the CoP. As a group of self-selected people who volunteer their time, there is no accountability structure and it is difficult to plan long term or to monitor success. Strategic planning generally assumes that resources are known in advance so they can be allocated towards agreed outputs. In our emergent CoP the main resource available is members’ time but because it is voluntary, the resource inputs are unpredictable. For this reason, we have used Outcome Mapping to help guide the direction of activities, which is one methodology considered useful in complex situations (Earl et al 2001). The Outcome Mapping process identifies ‘progress markers’ related to the behaviour change one would expect from an intervention. There are differentiated progress markers: those which are desired outcomes as the minimum permissible (expect to have); those that will happen if circumstances are favourable (would like to have), and; those that are truly aspirational (love to have) (Earl et al 2001). These progress markers are helpful when deciding where to focus limited energies and allow the community to assess if progress is being made in a desired direction.

One objective for cultivating the CoP at Bioversity, besides the learning objectives, was to collate and increase visibility of the organization’s scattered research on gender-responsive research, through development of ‘products’. The importance of ‘reification’ alongside

participation to make sure that participation is not just ephemeral has been stressed since the earliest CoP literature (Wenger 1998). For this reason, the CoP has focused energies on developing, for example, a strategy on gender which situates the COP in the framework of other institutional realities at Bioversity, such as the management structure and HR. It has also been a uniting force for an institutional narrative, pulling together success stories and sharing them on the organizational website.

### **Levels of participation**

The voluntary nature of participation is a mixed blessing. CoPs take many forms. Some have open membership and others limited membership. Participation can be voluntary, strongly encouraged by management, or compulsory (Borzillo et al 2011). The classic CoP literature describes participation as voluntary and motivated by a desire to learn and to share. Compulsory participation can have legitimacy issues and a negative impact on members' motivation to participate (Bourhis and Dubé 2010, Dubé et al 2003). On the other hand, making participation mandatory is a way of making sure that members get time and recognition for participation. It may also be easier to get things done, as you can organize a workplan and accountability structures. In our case, we have strived to have CoP participation recognised as members include it in their yearly performance agreement. Nonetheless, when members have intense work periods, learning often takes second place to delivering products, and engagement in the CoP decreases. Following the advice of Gongla and Rizzuto (2001) and McDermott (2000) to 'walk the halls', I established short calls to members to explore with them their motivation and expectations of the CoP. Without exception, members admitted to feelings of guilt about their low level of participation. However, the patterns in the CoP are what would be expected from the literature. Typically CoPs have a core group of 10-15% of the whole community, a further 15-20% who are active, and the great majority of members, 65-75%, whose participation is peripheral (Wenger et al 2002). In our case, there is a core group of about eight people, 12 regular participants, 15 occasional participants, and a group of about 19 silent participants. This silent group is not to be dismissed. According to the literature, they are often extracting value and learning from conversations but do not actively contribute as they do not have time or do not think their contributions are appropriate (Wenger et al 2002, 2009), lurking silently, and productively, for years. In our circumstances, in which many members have low capability in gender responsive research, it may be particularly expected.

The composition of the core, active and passive groups in the Gender CoP has been dynamic. Some participants have had periods of intense activity and then more passive periods. The intense periods may be dictated by a particular interest in a topic under discussion at that moment, while passive moments may be driven by periods of intense workload and competing demands. There are also other 'legitimately peripheral participants'. For example, a member of the Human Resources Unit is in the CoP as is the Deputy Director of the organization. In these cases, they act as boundary partners able to feed in perspectives and knowledge from other parts of the organization, and to draw observations from within the CoP to inform activities in other areas.

The nature of the participants conditions the conversations that take place. As noted in the context section above, the level of gender-responsive capability across the CoP was generally

low. It has been found that ‘novices are typically more interested in acquiring concrete skills, structured learning and explicit instruction, whereas more experienced [researchers] are interested in understanding the meaning of experiences’ (Roberts 2015). This has been seen in the requests for CoP activities, which have largely been for guidelines, instructions and lists of key readings, reflecting the prevalence of novices. More experienced gender-responsive researchers enrich the discussions by bringing personal experiences, nuance and exceptions.

## Conclusion

Returning to the framework of phases of a CoP discussed in the Introduction, in these two years the community of practice on gender research at Bioversity has progressed from discovering common ground and understanding what knowledge is valuable to share and develop (Inquiry stage) to a new phase now in which members are helping each other, sharing tips and solving problems (Coalescing stage). Soon it may be time to revisit the literature and explore the meaning and potential activities associated with the Maturing stage: building communal value, placing the domain in context, expanding the membership, establishing standard practice and setting a learning agenda.

I have found that the act of praxis, theory-informed action, has been helpful. The volume of recommendations and success factors is large and sometimes contradictory and CoPs are context-dependent so no one practitioner will be able to follow a CoP blueprint step by step. However, the literature offers clusters of advice for different stages which suggest steps and activities to follow that have worked for other contexts. It also helps understand phenomena that might be discouraging (why doesn’t everyone participate?) and to address them appropriately (don’t force them to leave or force them to participate, just accept their legitimately peripheral nature). Applying theory provides a short cut to action. As Kurt Lewin said, there is nothing as practical as a good theory. Even if CoP theory is not perhaps a theory in the strictest sense of the term, the tips and insights into factors influencing success and failure serve as pragmatic practical guidance for action.

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## **Abstract**

Kurt Lewin, father of social learning theory, once stated ‘There is nothing so practical as a good theory’. Communities of Practice are widely recognized and promoted as vehicles for learning in and across organizations. However it has been well documented that it is easier to describe their existence than to use that knowledge to bring one into being. Various authors have explored and described factors that seem useful to make a CoP work. The context is an agricultural research-for-development organization, in which low gender capacity at institutional level had been identified as a weakness that needed addressing. The author followed step by step the advice laid out by scholars and practitioners of CoP theory to explore whether engaging in ‘praxis’ (i.e. the



enactment of a theory) would be effective to nurture a CoP to raise gender research capacity. After 18 months of being nurtured according to theory, the CoP may be considered successful for this point in its history. It has an identity, regular meetings in which experiences are shared and problems discussed, increasing membership and a growing number of products generated by and shared among its membership. The implications of this case study are that careful study of the theory can lead to better practice and more effective learning. The steps taken to go from theory to practice, outlined in this paper, may be useful to other aspiring CoP practitioners.

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### **About the author**

Arwen Bailey works at Bioversity International ([www.bioversityinternational.org](http://www.bioversityinternational.org)) in the fields of knowledge sharing and science communications. She has an MSc in Systems Thinking in Practice (Open University, UK), with a special interest in social learning systems, such as Communities of Practice, and how change happens through people interacting and learning from each other within their own contexts. [a.bailey@cgiar.org](mailto:a.bailey@cgiar.org)

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<sup>i</sup> Reify, from the Latin for 'thing' (*res*) means to treat an abstract idea or concept as a real thing. Wenger (1998, Chapter 1) pairs reification and participation as a "duality fundamental to the negotiation of meaning". While participation is about "doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging", reification is about "producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'". In other words, it is the tools, forms, processes, documents which shape and are shaped by the lived experience.