

It's like a steady little trickle

"In summer 2000, it seemed that the whole conversation on com-prac was going to die off. So what I did was post some ridiculous message about CoPs and plumbing systems -- a message aimed at irritating readers and provoking strong reactions. And it worked: I got several messages back telling me how stupid the analogy was -- and I knew that com-prac was alive! These days when com-prac goes silent for a week, I never worry because something will eventually come up to keep the conversation going."

- John Smith

John Smith is the principal consultant at Learning Alliances, a technologist, teacher and coach for communities of practice. And he has hosted "com-prac", the largest Yahoo! group on communities of practice, over the past five years.

John, last month we saw the 1000th digest of com-prac, the largest Yahoo! group on communities of practice. How did it all start and what keeps the community going?

Paul Ford set up the list in October 1998. A half dozen people who were at a conference about communities of practice in Coconut Beach Florida had just completed Etienne Wenger's online workshop. It was my third workshop, and I had just begun helping with facilitation and was talking with George Por about launching a pay-to-join "Community Builders' Forum". Paul stood up and said, "We need to do it, E-Groups is free, I set it up already, here's how you join." And that was it. I wrote to other people who had been in the workshop and invited them and pretty soon we had 26 members. There are now about 800 people on the list. And I must say that com-prac has grown because a bunch of us have just kept talking. Look at the archives and you will find marvellous comments there. Longevity and steadiness keep com-prac going. Sustained conversation, fairly intellectual, has been the key.

What's the difference between com-prac and CPsquare?

There are some interesting differences between the two. First, com-prac is definitely less intimate and less formal than CPsquare. No membership is required (although I have kicked a couple people out and I often recruit people who might be interested); it is an e-mail list where everyone can read everything that's ever been posted (although your first posting has to be moderated by me). In fact, you don't really know who is reading the messages. Because it's a mailing list there are only one or two topics that can be discussed at the same time.

To me CPsquare seems like a bigger deal: you have to join and pay dues; as a community we have the intention to develop greater capacity and new ideas. As people are focusing on CoPs in many different fields it is somehow more purposeful. Conversations go much faster and you have the feeling that you have to come to a conclusion.

Accordingly, com-prac seems less ambitious than CPsquare: it's older, but also wilder, somehow. People just show up but, lo and behold, they've been thinking about these issues for years and doing really interesting things and they have a lot to offer. Sometimes com-prac seems like a steady little trickle that just keeps going and going. CPsquare requires more of a commitment. There's a place for both of them.

How do you know members benefit?

Often you don't. But sometimes people will say surprising things about what they've learned over the years. One woman told me that com-prac had saved her sanity several times: I guess it

reminded her at the right time that distributed communities of practice are hard to keep going. I think it might be the openness and simplicity that attracts people to com-prac.

Is membership steady?

Several of the original members are still around. There is some steady turn-over. People lose jobs or lose interest; others are very active for a certain period of time and then seem to disappear. What's important is that you'll still find marvellous contributions. People would post good things in com-prac because they know there's an intelligent audience listening.

How do you perceive your leadership role in com-prac? Are you seen as a leader? Do attitudes and perceptions held by the community affect your role as leader?

Actually, this question implies a much more activist leadership style than I feel comfortable with. What I've done is stimulate and provoke conversation, making occasional efforts to keep it going. "Leadership of com-prac" has entailed preventing arguments and keeping conversations from going too far off track. I also post links that might be of interest to people.

What I'm saying here is that I've participated in com-prac not as a leader but as a practitioner. My criterion for relevance is whether something matters from a practice perspective. I think of myself as one of the practitioners, not as some big leader. Many of our notions of leadership imply action or power "at a distance," whereas leadership in a community of practice is more about involvement that's really close-up. And if there is leadership in com-prac, it's very distributed. I would even say my legitimacy as a leader depends on the extent to which I'm involved in all the practices around communities of practice.

It's interesting to me that nobody really owns com-prac, so no-one can really push it. Leadership is really distributed. I think that com-prac is not really "facilitated" except in a very, very loose sense.

How much community-building effort takes place "behind the scenes"? How could you demonstrate your backchannel efforts? Well, would you have to?

Sometimes when I have the feeling that people are getting off track (or promoting themselves rather than promoting an inquiry) I write them a private e-mail. For example, if they don't label their postings as advertisements I tell them to do so. Or when people reply to a digest and forget to clip off the irrelevant stuff. Backchannel efforts like that don't take too much time, but I think they make a difference. Whenever new members join in, however, I have to approve their first posting, which takes a little time as I have to read and reflect on what they're saying. And in fact, I kicked off some people from the list when they started personal attacks or dominate the conversation without listening. That was a painful experience and it took several months to sort things out. There was a lot of backchannel warning. Melissie Rumizen helps, particularly with those sticky political situations.

We haven't seen too much of story telling in com-prac? Might this have something to do with the audience? In how far is com-prac different from communities like CPsquare or Knowledgeboard?

I try to encourage story-telling in com-prac by just asking people to tell their story. I ask both privately and publicly. For example, I often ask people to re-post something from another list that I think is interesting. Actually the public nature of com-prac may be a limiting factor, since stories sometimes imply more intimacy and negotiated context than exists on com-prac.

Is com-prac about actual community building or is it just talk about community building? How can we learn about community building in com-prac?

Com-prac itself is just an email conversation. There actually is a community around it. A moment of truth for me was when a couple of people confronted me for speaking too loosely one time, confusing a list with a community. Those reprimands made me realize that there really was some authenticity around com-prac – people care about how we talk about communities of practice. Mostly com-prac is talk about communities of practice, but since the pace is slow and steady, features of a community of practice gradually emerge. If you watch it long enough you can learn a lot by observing.

Does com-prac offer a collaborative learning opportunity to subscribers? What have you learned from com-prac?

People get what they put into com-prac. It's hard to say what they have learned, although if you browse the archives you'll find some really awesome comments. Com-prac definitely provides for connections that draw people closer. In the end, however, you need to sit down and have a beer or something to get to know people.

I have learned what a tremendous diversity of people are interested in CoPs. And also I've learned that sustained attention may matter more in a CoP than great skills of facilitation or technology -- in fact, com-prac has grown because a bunch of us just kept talking.

What about technology? Does current technology offered promote future development of com-prac?

I think com-prac has taught me that crude technology can do a lot. The technology offered by Yahoo-groups is quite sophisticated in many ways, although I prefer other systems for intense collaboration. Yahoo-Groups definitely has its place. It does shape the kind of conversation we find there. When people get too vehement about the importance or impact of technology on communities of practice, I point them to an article I found about people in a jail who found a way to use the plumbing system to communicate with each other. And I would take this as a reminder of how the human desire and instinct to communicate will always trump technology (good or bad). In fact, this should be a reminder to technologists that we should be appropriately humble about what we are doing with the Internet and not think we are the ones who enable conversation or even save the world. But still, I find myself unable to resist the desire to tweak and improve facilities in CPsquare. It's like when you move into a new house, you can't help but settle in and try to make it more comfortable.

What do you think about other software tools such as wikis?

Wikis, like many other media, open up new possibilities for communication. Isn't it a wonderful human characteristic that we're so flexible and can use wikis or even toilets to communicate?

Do you think com-prac does have a positive impact on business innovation? Is there also personal innovation among members? Could you give examples if and when collective conversation and idea sharing has led to innovation OR creativity?

This is a question I'd rather not answer on behalf of com-prac. You should ask the community, since com-prac is so low-key, ongoing and in some ways owned by practitioners. Knowledgeboard, for example, has had a much more vaunted goal to produce innovation. To me that could be something of a burden. I have no idea whether com-prac has produced innovation. I'm convinced it has had a lot of direct value to participants, but I couldn't say if this has gone "beyond that." Moreover, I haven't paid attention to com-prac in that way. It doesn't seem productive to be think about com-prac or communities of practice in that way without knowing a lot more about members' context – what innovation or learning means for them.

Have you ever thought of commercialising com-prac?

A year ago, someone brought that idea up. It was probably a brilliant idea but it didn't really make sense to me. I've hosted com-prac for the past five years but I still don't own it. And that seems just fine. It seems to me that trying to commercialise it would be a lack of respect. To me, com-prac has value as a public conversation about communities of practice. I use it to advertise events like the CPsquare workshop and others post advertisements on occasion, too.

What is still on your to-do list? What can we expect from the future? Where do you want com-prac to head to?

I don't have anything on my to-do list related to com-prac. I simply cannot invest as much effort and time into com-prac, so I'm pretty deliberate about not setting goals. It will be interesting to find out how it grows and evolves. So, it may change over time, but it's through participation not through any plans to change it. I can say, however, that conversations in com-prac have definitely gotten more sophisticated over the years.

This interview was held in May 2004 by Christina Merl (christina.merl@chello.at), a community workshop mentor and freelance journalist in Vienna, on behalf of efios (www.efios.com). It has been licensed by efios under a Creative Commons license.