

Fostering Learning Communities

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One of the hottest organizational topics today is communities and how they can add high value to the organization at relatively low cost and effort. And the greatest interest in communities is focused on learning communities - communities that learn from and with each other through knowledge sharing. These learning communities are given a wide variety of names depending on the personal preference of whoever chooses the name and the context in which it is being used. Some of the names I have seen used by different organizations and community practitioners, include: community of practice (CoP); knowledge (or learning) community; knowledge (or learning) network; knowledge (or learning) council; neighborhood; cadre; peer assist network; and others. I am using the term "learning community" here because I believe its two root words best describe and encompass the concepts and examples I will be talking about in this article.

What Is A Community?

I have already addressed this question in a separate article of the same name. See "[What is a Community?](#)" for my views on this subject. I will be using parts of this description of community in this article to explain how I believe you can foster a learning community. Note that if you are reading a hard copy of this article, you will be unable to use the hyperlinks provided in the electronic version to access the references made here. In this case, all articles referenced here, as well as other useful articles, are available in the Work Frontiers cybrary (online library) at <http://www.workfrontiers.com/cybrary.html>.

What Is Learning?

*Learning without thought is labor lost;
Thought without learning is perilous."
-Confucius*

*"No truth is really taught by words, or interpreted by intellectual or logical
method; truth must be lived into meaning, before it can be truly known."
-Horace Bushnell*

I view knowledge and learning as inseparably related, despite the fact that many organizational efforts around knowledge management or organizational learning try to keep them separate. I believe this is due mainly to internal organizational politics, as well as to the personal comfort level, competencies or function of the people supporting the effort. I think it is particularly important to view *community* learning through a knowledge lens, focusing on the real purpose of learning as well as the fundamental process for achieving this purpose, rather than through a formal educational lens. I believe the formal educational lens focuses mainly on accumulating information and developing a set of generic skills such as reading, report writing, and individual

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problem solving through steadfast traditional processes which are aimed at doing that and only that.

This problem with traditional learning is why there is so much interest in community-based learning. We are finding that the knowledge we *really* need to deal with the rapidly increasing complexity and change in our organizations and society doesn't come to us through traditional methods of formal education. It comes to us mainly through experience that is at least to some extent gained, shared, reflected and improved upon, and put back into future practice through social interaction in the context of a community of peers. This experience and the practices that grow out of it need to be grounded in a simple set of core concepts that *may* come from some type of traditional learning such as classroom education. But the core concepts can also come just as effectively from the collective intelligence of the community, reflecting upon its collective experiences and deriving the core concepts behind what seems to work and what doesn't around the core body of knowledge and practices that represent the shared purpose and context of the community.

In essence, I view knowledge and learning as interwoven as the parts of a sentence, where knowledge is the "object" and learning is the "verb." So to understand learning, we need to look at it in terms of knowledge.

I don't believe in rigid definitions. Instead I believe in rich, dynamic stories, descriptions, or distinctions of something. For more about distinctions vs. definitions, see <http://www.workfrontiers.com/distinctionary.html>. So like any other complex concept, there are many distinctions of or ways to view knowledge. One way to view it for the purpose of understanding community learning is:

Knowledge is information with sufficient **meaning** to provide **context** to the user in doing work or other activities that are important to the community.

A simple way to think about the difference between data, information, and knowledge is that as you move through the data to knowledge continuum the material takes on increasing levels of context and meaning and the perceiver or user gains increasing levels of understanding as a result.

The important messages here about knowledge are:

- The difference between information and knowledge is one of context: knowledge provides context for gaining deeper understanding of the information. This means that the primary focus of learning should be providing context and meaning around whatever information is being shared and learned. As I mentioned above, in community learning this context and meaning is best provided "through experience that is at least to some extent gained, shared, reflected and improved upon, and put back into future practice through social interaction in the context of a community of peers." How to do this will be discussed in more detail later.
- Knowledge is "in the eye of the beholder"; that is, it is the amount of meaning provided to the user, not the creator, which determines whether or not it is knowledge. Note, however, that the creator can also be a user of the knowledge. For example, in the case of tacit (individual, internal, unrecorded) knowledge, the user is typically the creator, as the person uses their own knowledge to conduct their work and their life.

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This means that knowledge sharing, which is the key community learning process, needs to ensure that the users of the knowledge being shared will gain maximum value from it. Since it is very difficult to know in advance exactly what a given user will need in order to gain deep understanding of the knowledge being shared, the more interactive the knowledge sharing process, the more likely that the sharer will meet the needs of the user. This interactivity will also enable the sharer to learn from the sharing experience, as they receive feedback on their knowledge, as well as additional knowledge to supplement theirs.

For example, consider the knowledge represented by a presentation. If the user only has access to an audio or video record of the presentation accompanied by copies of the slides, they have no way of asking questions, giving feedback, or sharing their own related experiences. Think of how much more valuable a presentation is when you have a chance to interact with the presenter without strict time limits or other constraints on the interaction with the presenter and other audience members. And a traditional presentation like this is only a fairly primitive form of interactive knowledge sharing. So the possibilities for deep transformational learning become far greater as the levels and contextual richness of the interactivity increase.

- The knowledge the community should care about is the knowledge people need to do the work or activities associated with the community, not all the knowledge they possess. The scope of community learning needs to be guided by the collective needs of the community. This means that the community needs to have a clear, shared understanding of its purpose and identity and how these translate into the community's needs for knowledge and learning. These needs will change as the community and its environment change, so they need to be revisited as significant changes occur.

For example, a community operating inside of a technology company that is focused on sharing knowledge about a certain type of technology will be faced with a rapidly changing technological landscape. They will need to build into their learning process an almost continuous process of assessing what technologies and other related factors they should be focused on and which ones this particular community will not concern itself with. This is because the technological landscape today is so vast, complex, and dynamic that a community that doesn't keep a clear, shared understanding of what it wants to focus on will rapidly lose its effectiveness.

But what also needs to be factored into this are the needs of the organization or greater community to which this community belongs. This is where community learning can differ from other types of organizational learning. Because it is a self-organizing, voluntary group, the community may have different priorities for learning than the organization or greater community to which it belongs. This then is a secondary focus of community learning for the organization or greater community. Not only should they help support the learning that is important to the members of the community, but they should help the community keep its purpose and learning priorities aligned with the needs of the organization or greater community. I wrote a separate article on one of the best means of gaining this alignment, "[Getting Strategic Value from Constellations of Communities](#)".

For the technology community example just related to you, this might mean that this particular community is aligned with other communities in the company focused on

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technologies that are somewhat related to the technology of this community, but that the community doesn't have the time or expertise to deal with. This *constellation* of technology communities could establish boundary spanning or linking mechanisms that would allow them to share knowledge across community boundaries. This would give all members of the constellation access to a bigger and better integrated knowledge picture of this entire technology landscape. The company would also gain access to this greater understanding of the technology landscape, providing it with a very valuable strategic advantage.

- Knowledge by itself is of no value to the community or to the organization or greater community to which it belongs. It is only when the knowledge is focused and applied to work or other activities needed to carry out the purpose of the community, in alignment with the purpose of the organization or greater community, that it becomes valuable to all stakeholders; that is, it becomes intellectual capital.

Given how little spare time and attention people have these days, it is important to keep the community focused on the knowledge, learning, and work that will provide the greatest value to all community stakeholders. If the example technology community is like most, every member of this community also participates in formal organizational groups such as teams and departments as well as in other communities. With so little time and attention to spare, staying focused on the technologies, developments, and trends most important to the success of the community and the company will be a critical success factor for this community. A clear sense of community purpose and scope shared by all stakeholders, as well as roles, processes, and tools that support this focusing will be needed to ensure success.

So in summary, an important role for the community, the organization or greater community, and their strategies, leadership, practices and systems is to provide **access to the information** the community needs to do their community-related work **in context**, as well as **help in creating meaning** from it **and in focusing** it on doing work that is vital to all stakeholders.

Why Learning Communities?

"There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance."

-Socrates

"I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."

-Thomas Jefferson

I would like to start with a brief history of learning and how it has come full circle back to the realm of communities. Stories such as this are one of the best learning tools we have. As I like to say, "People don't think in facts and figures; they think in stories." By stories, I don't just mean narratives but the images that go with them as well, either ones that accompany the narrative or the images we create in our imaginations as we hear or read the narrative. Note: this is one of the first clues to fostering learning - storytelling. If you reflect back on my distinctions of knowledge, this makes sense. What better way to provide context and meaning than through a story that engages us at the deeper levels of our consciousness where we make sense of what we experience in our lives and fundamentally alter our perceptions as a result; in other words *we learn*.

In tribal communities, learning was as integral a part of tribal life as all other tribal activities. There was no separation between doing and learning, teacher and student. Whatever the members of the tribe needed to survive was learned when it was needed from whoever was most available and able to share the needed knowledge. Learning meant survival; without it the tribe starved or was devastated by war or disease. Storytelling was a key part of community learning. As Richard Stone describes in *The Healing Art of Storytelling* (1996, Hyperion, New York):

"As the nights grew longer, storytelling often took the main stage. The central fire's radiance did more than warm the bones of those gathered there. Its flames fueled their imaginations, and in a powerful way, provided a setting for weaving a group of people together. Fires of old melted the jagged edges of individuality, making it possible for a clan to create and sustain a community and a culture."

As hunter/gatherer tribes gradually were displaced by agricultural communities, most learning became the realm of the extended family - the closest equivalent they had to the tribe. Grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and sisters would teach girls what they needed to know and grandfathers, fathers, uncles, and brothers would teach the boys. The modes of learning were basically the same as in tribal communities - mainly through experiential trial and error guided by nurturing, mentoring or coaching, and through family storytelling.

As towns and cities grew in size and social and economic importance, learning began to become fragmented and specialized just as professions and social roles became more fragmented and specialized. "Book learning" became the realm of schools and universities, teachers and professors. The learning of professional skills became the realm of the master craftsmen who took on apprentices to learn their craft through years of the same type of experiential learning and coaching farmers used to teach their sons how to farm. Spiritual or religious learning was the

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realm of increasingly powerful and hierarchical religious institutions. Note that spiritual learning had always been the one form of learning that tended to be specialized throughout history, being the realm of the witch doctor, shaman, guru, hadj, priest, or rabbi. "Civilization" just seemed to give these religious teachers more power and thus more control over what people in the society learned and did in their daily lives. This often extended into "book learning" as well, since many of the educational institutions were run by religious institutions. However, most learning about the daily "chores" of living, including the work most women were engaged in - child rearing and maintaining the family household, remained the realm of the extended family.

The increasing fragmentation and specialization also gave rise to a new form of organization to help compensate for the separation created by this phenomenon. Crafts guilds and farmers cooperatives enabled members of a professional community to socialize and share knowledge with their peers and to collectively promote the interests of the profession among the society at large.

The industrial revolution brought with it a tendency to try to make everything more standardized, and thus it was thought, more efficient. Learning became increasingly structured, specialized, and removed from the experiences of work and daily life, becoming almost the exclusive realm of formal educational institutions, mostly run by the government. Communities still existed in large numbers throughout society, but they weren't looked to for learning. The role of agricultural coops, crafts guilds, religious institutions, and the extended family in learning gradually eroded to the point where for most people in "modern society," these modes of learning were largely unavailable or irrelevant to them. This model of learning has continued up until the present, as this is the model that most forms of formal education still follow. Until very recently, formal education was largely thought to be the only form of learning that was needed to work and interact in our society.

You may have noticed that the primary "steward of learning" at each stage of our social evolution has tended to be the institution with the most power and importance in the society at that time. From the tribe to the extended family to the church to craftsmen to government and now it seems, to the special interest groups that dominate our current political, social, and economic environment. Until recently, the most dominant form of special interest group was large corporations, but increasingly other types of interest groups are banding together and gaining greater influence through their collective size, relationships, and intelligence - industry, professional, and gender, ethnic, or generation-specific associations, societies, and political action groups; charitable organizations; social causes; religious groups; and now even online communities. And it is these special interest groups who are looking for better modes of learning to satisfy their needs for the knowledge required to cope with the increasingly diverse, complex, and dynamic environment in which they are operating. Thus we have come back full circle to the "tribal fires" of community-based learning, since it is this form of learning we are finding to be most effective at dealing with this type of complex knowledge landscape.

How Do You Foster Learning In A Community?

"The ideal condition

Would be, I admit, that men should be right by instinct;

But since we are all likely to go astray,

The reasonable thing is to learn from those who can teach."

-Sophocles

"They have all a lively faith in the perfectibility of man; they judge that the diffusion of knowledge must necessarily be advantageous, and the consequences of ignorance fatal; they all consider society as a body in a state of improvement, humanity as a changing scene, in which nothing is, or ought to be, permanent; and they admit that what appears to them today to be good, may be superseded by something better tomorrow."

-Alexis de Tocqueville

I chose the term fostering because it is the one word which I think best describes the non-controlling, but supportive approach to learning needed by communities. Fostering means to bring up with care; to help to grow or develop; to stimulate and promote. This is a simple concept, but difficult to execute because we have been so indoctrinated in a belief system that any group needs to be "managed" in order to be productive. As I said in "Getting Strategic Value from Constellations of Communities":

"Due to their voluntary and naturally emergent nature, communities cannot be controlled using traditional management techniques. Communities, like gardens, must be cultivated and gently nurtured if they are to thrive and multiply. Heavy-handed control will produce the same results as standing in a garden and beating the plants into submission while trying to make them grow."

This applies to any type of community, but particularly to learning communities. Effective learning can't be dictated or forced. It must emerge naturally from the experiences and interactions of the members of a community, bonded together for the purpose of knowledge sharing and learning about a core subject everyone feels passionate about or at least has a strong vested, personal interest in knowing about.

In this article, I will skip over the fundamentals of fostering the community itself and concentrate on how to foster learning. You may refer to the Work Frontiers cybrary for other articles I have written on communities to learn more about how to foster communities.

The first step in fostering learning is to gain a clear, shared understanding of the knowledge and learning needs of the community, and if it is part of an organization or greater community, how the community's needs align with the needs of the parent body or bodies. There are many ways to approach the assessment of knowledge and learning needs (what is often called a "knowledge audit"), but I am not going to cover specific audit/assessment techniques here. Typically at Work Frontiers, our preferred approach is to use one of our core competencies, organizational anthropology, as the basis for this type of assessment. For more on how we use the ethnographic techniques of anthropologists to assess knowledge and learning needs, refer to two articles I have written on this subject: [Example of an Ethnographic Knowledge Audit](#) and [Anthropology and](#)

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[Knowledge Codification: A Journey from the Amazon Rain Forests to Amazon.com.](#)

Rather than cover the techniques of knowledge and learning assessment here, I will pose some possible questions we might typically seek to answer when we conduct such an assessment. These are the types of questions I suggest you seek to answer in your own community to help you *really* understand your community's knowledge and learning needs. After you gain this collective, in-depth understanding of your community's needs, you should co-develop a learning strategy to meet these needs. Like the organic community you are working with, this strategy should also be organic - an emergent, flexible menu of possibilities, not your typical rigid, structured strategic plan. Note that this is based on complexity theory - an important conceptual framework for understanding how to work with organic, biological entities such as communities. For more information on self-organizing, emergent approaches to dealing with human systems, refer to "[Work Ecology -- The Next Step in the Evolution of the High Performance Enterprise](#)" in the Work Frontiers cybrary. This also contains links to more information about the focus of complexity theory - [complex, adaptive systems](#).

Be mindful that done well, for example as an ongoing "strategic conversation", the process of needs assessment and strategy development can be one of the most powerful learning tools available to the community and its parent bodies. By involving all community stakeholders in looking deeply at themselves and their needs and developing their own strategies for enhanced knowledge practices, you begin to create the necessary ownership of an ongoing learning mindset and process that is the heart of a learning community.

The needs assessment and strategy development, like any other community activity should be approached with common sense, not dogmatic adherence to what I or anyone else says is the "right way" to do it. For example, early on in the needs assessment you will discover some obvious opportunities for immediate action that are almost sure "winners." Common sense says you don't wait until the assessment is over to jump on those opportunities. By all means do them in parallel with the rest of the needs assessment. Another common sense approach is to focus on the positive rather than the negative. Avoid rehashing the same old complaints, problems, or "pie-in-the-sky" wishlists that are the perennial gripes or demands of people in the community or organization. Instead focus on what works and what can realistically be done. Another common sense approach is to seek to leverage the community's existing strengths and intellectual assets. They are typically tremendously underutilized and require far less time and resources to leverage than to start up whole new efforts, recruit and hire new people, or develop new knowledge or capabilities.

In the next section are these possible needs assessment questions. Then the following section contains brief examples of some of the strategies we have used to address the needs uncovered during this assessment. The exact questions you should ask in your assessment, as well as the strategies for meeting the needs you discover are highly contextual. Note that if you ask the right questions, you have already begun to answer them. So in the following questions, you will see hints as to what the possible strategies might be to deal with the needs that arise from exploring the questions.

Please keep in mind that these are only illustrative examples, not cookie-cutter recipes and that each of these strategies could warrant a separate article, guidebook, or support tool in itself. There is no "cookie-cutter" approach to fostering learning communities! A deep understanding of these needs combined with access to expertise in some of the possible ways you can meet the needs is probably the best way to foster learning in your community.

Possible Knowledge And Learning Assessment Questions

Notes:

- For brevity, I will use the following abbreviations in the next 2 sections:
 - ◆ K = knowledge
 - ◆ L = learning
 - ◆ K&L = knowledge & learning
- When I refer to K (knowledge) here, again for brevity, I am referring to the entire set of knowledge-related attributes required for people to perform the work or other activities of the community, including knowledge, skill, competency, capability, expertise, or mental models. I am not referring to cultural attributes of people and communities such as values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.
- When I refer to the "organization or greater community to which this community belongs" or "parent bodies", I am referring to:
 - ◆ a corporation, government agency, online portal, or non-profit or other organization which is trying to foster this and perhaps other learning communities internally or among its external stakeholder communities such as customers, suppliers, residents, voters, or members
 - ◆ a larger community which contains this community as well as others; these may be aligned only loosely as part of a larger, unorganized community or consciously by connecting the communities into one or more constellations (see ["Getting Strategic Value from Constellations of Communities"](#) for more information on working with constellations of communities)

Core Assessment Questions:

- Communities
 - ◆ If specific communities haven't been identified yet, look for the groups of people who are already acting like communities or at least have most of the attributes of a community (see "What is a Community?" for these attributes). What other groups of people appear to have the greatest potential as high value learning communities? What pressing needs exist in the organization or greater community for communities or constellations that don't yet exist - ones that could provide high value if a way was found to create learning communities or constellations to meet the needs?
- Culture
 - ◆ What are the core purpose, identity, values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the community, particularly regarding K&L?
 - ◆ How were these developed or evolved? What is the history of the community?
 - ◆ How have they been codified and made available to the members and other stakeholders of the community?
 - ◆ How do these align with those of the organization or greater community to which it belongs? How do they align with their expectations of this community?
 - ◆ How do these align with the individual expectations, needs, mindsets, and behaviors of the members of the community?
 - ◆ How might these enable or present obstacles to the community's K&L needs?
 - ◆ What is the history of K&L in this community and its parent bodies?
 - What approaches to K&L are currently being used? What has been tried in the past?
 - What has worked and hasn't worked? Why? What attitudes exist because of this history?
 - ◆ What is the history of change in this community and its parent bodies?

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- Has change been embraced as a way of life in the community, bitterly opposed, met with passive resistance, or a mix?
- What has worked well for enabling change in the community and what has failed? Why? What attitudes exist because of this history?
- Community K creation, sharing & learning practices (here collectively called "K&L practices")
 - ◆ What specific K&L practices currently exist in the community? How effective are they? Are they formal or informal, structured or unstructured, managed or emergent/organic? What appears to be the best mix and focus of these practices for a given learning need or situation?
 - ◆ How do these K&L practices fit into and support current work practices?
 - ◆ Where are the seeds of high value K&L; that is, what ideas, competencies, roles, processes, tools, relationships, constellations, and other leverage points exist within or connected to the community where the most effective K&L practices appear to take place or where they could most easily take place? What is needed to sustain these over time, especially through times of high stress and rapid change?
 - ◆ Which individuals are already acting in key K&L support roles or appear to have the characteristics needed to do so? Some possible roles are described in strategies below.
 - What are their current roles? What are their aptitudes, perspectives and concerns about the possibilities of fostering a learning community or constellation? What competencies and behaviors need to be developed to make them effective in supporting a learning community or constellation?
- Community relationships
 - ◆ What community relationships exist? How are they currently created and used for K&L? What roles are played in these relationships? How could these relationships be leveraged and what other relationships are needed for high value K&L?
 - between different members of the community?
 - between this community and the organization or greater community to which it belongs?
 - between this community and other communities or organizations?
 - ◆ what relationships and other boundary spanning elements already exist that create or present the possibility of creating a high value constellation of learning communities?
 - ◆ if the conditions for a constellation don't already exist, to what other communities could the community you are studying link to create a high value learning constellation (or constellations)? What boundary spanning elements already exist or could most easily be fostered to help create this constellation (or these constellations)?

Possible Additional Assessment Questions:

- How do community members spend their time when performing community-related activities?
 - ◆ what types of activities/work?
 - ◆ their role in the work, particularly their K role (e.g., K creator, SME, K user, etc.)?
 - ◆ primary communication/collaboration/interaction needed to perform the work?
 - ◆ primary existing enablers to facilitate the communication/collaboration/interaction?
- What K do they need to do these activities?
 - ◆ What K do the individual members think they need to do their work?
 - ◆ What K do the community "leaders", facilitators, brokers, cybrarians, or SME's think the community needs to carry out its purpose?
 - ◆ What K does the community as a whole appear to need to carry out its purpose?
 - ◆ What K does the community appear to need in order to align its outcomes with the needs of the organization or greater community to which it belongs?

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- ◆ What K do the "leaders", facilitators, brokers, cybrarians, or SME's of the parent bodies think the community needs to carry out its purpose in alignment with their needs?
- ◆ Does the community have access to the kinds of knowledge and info they need when they need it and in the form they need it in?
- ◆ What form?
- ◆ Where/whom do they get the info/K from:
 - From unstructured tacit sources (other people or their own memory)?
 - From unstructured explicit sources (typically documents, e-mail, unmanaged local files, multi media)?
 - From semi-structured explicit sources (typically the web, in all of its many forms, flavors, and tools)
 - From structured explicit sources (typically managed database systems)?
- ◆ Primary means of recording/accessing/sharing/using knowledge?
- ◆ How current/dynamic?
- ◆ Structured/managed? – who manages, how
- ◆ How accessible?
- ◆ How reliable?
- How do they use it?
- What do they do with it when they're finished?
- What apparent gaps exist between what K exists and what they need?
- When they encounter a K gap, how do they usually fill the gap? How would they most like to do it, even if it's not easily available to them now?
- Innovation
 - ◆ Individual or community activity?
 - ◆ How do they innovate?
 - ◆ How does existing K serve as the foundation for new K?
 - Ignore existing K that may address the need, but create new K instead
 - Check for possible re-use of existing K & innovate when can't find K that meets their needs
 - New use of existing K - adapt existing K to new uses
 - Improvement - Use existing K but improve it to achieve new levels of performance
- Attitudes towards K sharing
 - ◆ hoard, share, or apathetic?
 - ◆ potential obstacles, opportunities, & personal risks/benefits of K sharing
 - ◆ how well is it done within own community
 - ◆ how well is it done with other communities and organizations with whom they need to interact
- What enhances the flow & sharing of knowledge/information?
- What impedes it?
- Systemic learning
 - ◆ To what extent and how does the community use feedback about its work and its environment to share about, reflect on, learn from, & adapt, improve, or evolve its beliefs & practices to reflect its collective experiential learning?
 - ◆ Is this done systemically & organically - looking at the entire community and its surroundings as an evolving ecosystem composed of interdependent, self-organizing organisms?
- What current K&L efforts are underway? What current K&L efforts or practices are going on that are not labeled or recognized as being K&L-focused, but that have a significant K&L component or purpose?
 - ◆ How well are these working?

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- ◆ What can be learned from them that can be applied to other community K&L activities?
- ◆ What can be learned from them that can be shared with other communities and the organization or greater community to which this community belongs?
- Technology & other tools
 - ◆ What do community members use & how much & how well do they use it to aid their work?
 - ◆ How do they use it for communication, learning, K sharing, innovation, & accessing info & expertise?
 - ◆ Attitude toward technology - what is their comfort level?
 - ◆ What is their level of expertise with it?
 - ◆ What tools are available vs. what is effectively used?
 - ◆ How much more effective could they be with improved levels of tool support & comfort & expertise in using them?
 - ◆ How could this increased performance be focused to improve the community & the organization & greater community to which it belongs?

Possible Community Learning Strategies

Culture & Environment

The specific steps to fostering a knowledge sharing and learning culture depend on the context, particularly on whether this learning community is part of an organization or greater community which already has an entrenched culture and environmental requirements or expectations for any entity for which it is a parent. If the learning community is more free-standing such as a member community within an online portal or association, then there probably will be fewer constraints imposed on the community. They can co-create their culture through initial dialogue and then watching and learning from what emerges from their interactions, evolving the culture according to what they learn. But in any case, there appear to be certain fundamental cultural and environmental prerequisites for creating a K&L culture. These include the following elements:

- Trust & respect between all members of the community is the cornerstone of a K&L culture
- Freedom
 - ◆ "service-oriented" leadership, providing hands-off support within framework of strategic direction and accountability; especially moral and resource support for intelligent risk taking that leads to some value for the community and its parent bodies even if it's just the learning and change resulting from a "failure" (primarily needed within a parent body such as a corporation)
- Time
 - ◆ regular face-to-face get-togethers, even for virtual communities
 - ◆ time for individual & collaborative reflection, sharing, creativity, learning, & change
 - ◆ synchronization of community events & activities with members' time zones & schedules
- Knowledge-rich innovation & learning environment
- Clear, shared purpose and identity, as well as a core set of shared values
- Generally accepted norms or rules for community behavior
- K&L stays focused on what's most important to the purpose and needs of the community as well as the needs of the parent bodies

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- K&L activities are more deliberate, orchestrated, and systematic than the free wheeling, unfocused learning that takes place in most unfacilitated communities, without stifling the enthusiasm and creativity that accompanies spontaneous, informal K&L
- A key goal of community K&L is creating a pool of collective intelligence - a community memory - that will sustain the community and its parent bodies beyond the participation of any one individual, community, or community sub-group
- Knowledge becomes more useful and accessible to every community member as well as to selected stakeholders with which the community wishes to share their knowledge. Nobody feels "left out" or "uninformed." The goal is that everyone can access the knowledge and expertise they need when they need it in the form they need it.
- Collective internal & external intelligence are used to help make community decisions. The collective knowledge of the community about itself and its external environment available to and shared by everyone in the community becomes the foundation of all decision making (supported by intuition, if the community is open to this concept). Decisions are made quickly and decisively because everyone involved knows what has to be done and collaborates to get it done. Countless meetings & other things which slow down the whole process of getting things done are eliminated because people have the knowledge they need to make good decisions and take quick, thoughtful action.

A good way to expedite the process is to make decisions by alignment, not consensus or compromise. Consensus decision making has been the downfall of many communities and organizations. It simply takes too long to make timely decisions in a rapidly changing environment. Compromise creates long standing bad feelings and conflicts. Alignment says that *everyone can live with the decision*, but they don't have to agree that the choice made was their first choice. This allows people to move beyond having to be right to just getting the job done as effectively and quickly as possible. They can save face and protect their status in the community by saying "I can live with the decision, even though I think there was a better alternative."

- Community practices are continuously shared and compared, enabling the community to learn from the best aspects of each and combine them into innovative new practices or to re-use practices which are particularly exemplary. These innovative and exemplary practices (often called "best practices") are spread rapidly to other areas where they may be useful.
- Learning is quickly embedded back into the work of the community. The community shares, reflects upon and learns from its experiences and embeds this learning back into its practices, knowledge sources, and strategies. The community has a goal of not repeating the same mistakes and not re-inventing the same ideas or things.
- Knowledge is brokered and shared with the parent organization, within the community's constellation, and with other related communities and organizations
- Community members feel naturally connected to each other as well as to the parent bodies and other communities and individuals with whom they want to be connected
- Learning communities begin to break down and bridge traditional barriers that typically separate different organizations, professions, locations, social, political and economic entities, governments, and so on.
- The learning community empowers its individual members to take personal responsibility for their own K&L
- Sensitive knowledge is kept secure from anyone who could potentially harm the community and its parent bodies if they possessed the knowledge

Relationships

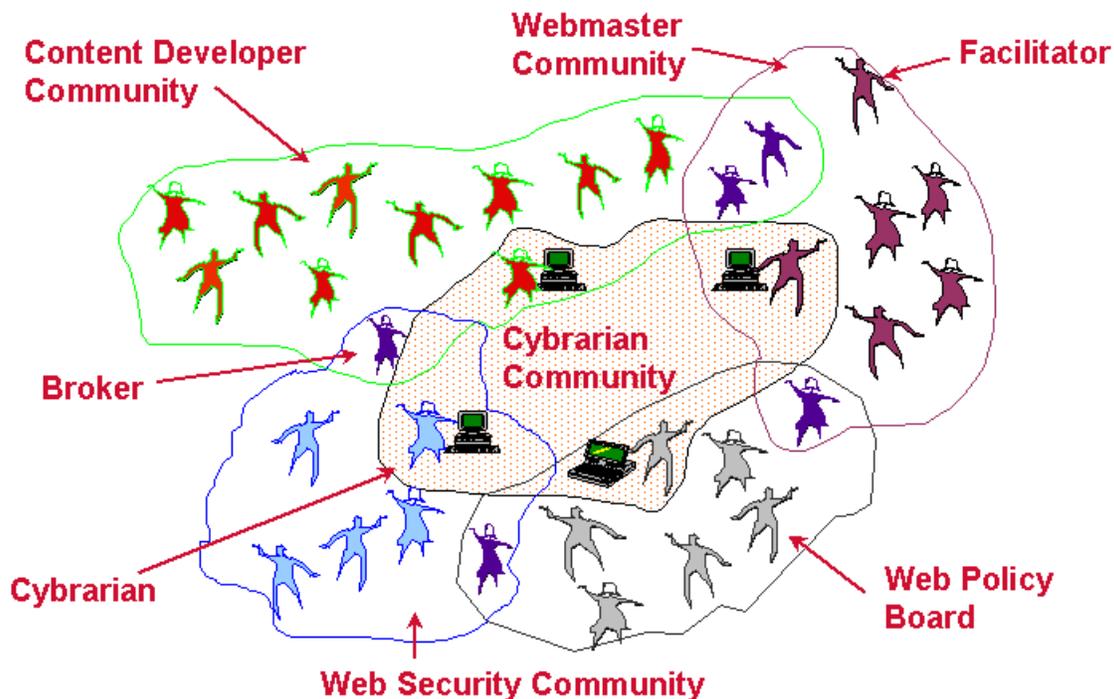
Strategies for supporting the relationships of the community are already well documented in my article on ["Getting Strategic Value from Constellations of Communities"](#). Even if formal constellations are not employed, the same strategies for linking communities within a constellation are also applicable to other community relationships, including relationships with other communities, parent bodies, and external entities.

Roles & Accountabilities

The roles that support community K&L often occur as naturally as the community to which they belong. How effective these roles are in the K&L environment of the community and its parent bodies depends on the extent to which they recognize the importance of these roles and support them with tools, time, and education. These communities often do not work together all the time, so they tend to require good virtual collaboration tools and knowledge repositories to function well. This means that the people in these communities, particularly the ones playing these key roles, need to be trained in how to play these roles in a virtual environment. Some of the key roles in a learning community are described below and shown in the following diagram.

- The facilitator is the person or persons who naturally “rally the troops” and keep them working toward a common purpose. They are given the authority to facilitate by the community; they can’t be given formal organizational authority or they lose their effectiveness. They are the leaders who just arise naturally in a group. Since this is a natural rather than an appointed role, it may shift from one person to another over time or under different circumstances, or may be shared by multiple people at the same time.
- The cybrarian or knowledge steward is the kind of person or persons who naturally like to collect and organize information. They’re the ones who always take good notes at meetings, who like to tinker with new technologies like the web, and who always have that one document or memo you’re looking for that nobody else can find. They are invaluable as the natural keeper of organizational memory or history.
- The broker is the person or persons who typically kind-of sit on the edge of the community. They are not usually the leading expert in its main activities, but connected to them nevertheless, and liked and respected by members of the community. They also happen to have a similar relationship with other communities because they are natural socializers and connectors. These relationships can be formalized via a constellation or they can be informal. In either case, the brokers form the key links between communities, between the community and its parent bodies, and between the community and its external environment. Communities, through these brokers, also form what are typically called the informal communication networks of an organization. They are the ones who “know someone who knows” what you’re looking for. They may not be the experts on a subject, but they know who to ask within their extensive network of contacts.

A Constellation of Communities & Roles That Support Each Community



Other roles which can support community K&L activities include: subject matter expert (SME), learning guide, trainer/master/mentor/coach, "super user", "super coach" or coaches coach, trainers trainer, and others which may be specific to your community K&L environment. Peripheral roles which help to support these community activities include sponsor, champion, catalyst, change agent, editor, graphic facilitator, information architect, visual and multimedia designers, and webmaster.

Processes & Activities

Learning communities work best when supported with the right balance or mix of learning processes and activities: formal and informal; structured and unstructured; managed and emergent/organic; ongoing K&L activities and special learning events; online and face-to-face interactions; facilitated, self-directed, and spontaneous learning; re-use, new use and innovation; long term and short term; strategic and operational; breakthroughs, incremental insights and improvements, and sustaining activities. The right mix is determined by your findings during the K&L assessment as well as by what emerges when you start doing them, so there is no way to tell you in advance what that will be. But by observing what already works best in the community, or if no community exists yet, within the parent bodies, by bringing in outside knowledge of what works well for others, and by involving the members of the community in designing their own K&L processes and activities, you have a good chance of coming up with a workable number of them to at least start with. There is no optimal set, so once you find some that work well for you, run with them and adapt them as you learn from your experiences with them, as well as from sharing knowledge with other community K&L practitioners. Some of the possible processes and activities to consider are:

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- ◆ Ad hoc, informal, unstructured K sharing
 - chance encounters with someone with the K they need, but they may not even know it exists or that they need it until this encounter
 - deliberate, one time, ad hoc contacts with the people who know - phone call, email, fax, page, visit, etc.
 - opportunistic storytelling - telling stories that fit a situation as it arises
- ◆ Semi-formal, semi-structured K sharing
 - scheduled meetings, conferences, seminars, benchmarking trips
- ◆ Orchestrated, but organic K seeking
 - [ethnographic study](#); research outpost, sabbatical, experiment, pilot, prototype
- ◆ Orchestrated, but organic K sharing
 - coaching, mentoring, apprenticeship
 - self-organized sharing of lessons learned and "best practices" with peers
 - collaborative conversations, such as [knowledge cafés](#) and strategic conversations
 - [transformative learning events](#) such as best practice conferences, open space sessions, [futurizing events](#) such as future scans, online learning events, and [synchronous online and face-to-face learning events](#)
 - participation in ongoing K sharing communities such as online discussion groups, wisdom councils, communities of practice, local study groups
 - after-action-reviews or lessons learned sessions after each significant activity or event
 - scheduled storytelling sessions; explicitly capturing stories or case studies from significant events and activities as they occur
- ◆ Formal, structured training/education
 - online; classroom
 - taught; self-taught but guided; completely self-directed
- ◆ Traditional academic research
 - Individual, group, or combo
- ◆ Intelligence gathering & market research
 - typically focused on gathering intelligence about the community or organization's external environment: customers, markets, competitors, technology, emerging political, economic, technological, & social trends

Technology

(most of this section was provided by George Pór of [Community Intelligence Labs](#), a Work Frontiers strategic partner)

- Community Interaction Centers
 - ◆ Facilitated dialogue forums (asynchronous)
 - ◆ Facilitated chat room (synchronous)
 - ◆ Online meeting room (synchronous), such as desktop videoconferencing, complete with virtual whiteboards
 - ◆ Document sharing
 - ◆ Audio/video streaming or downloads
- Learning Centers - web-enabled communication designed to support new approaches to innovation and learning
- Event Space - space(s) for holding special interactive learning events such as an online conference, workshop, or symposium. This may make use of some of these other community support tools, but the event space should be specially designed to enhance the sensory experience and interaction of the event. This may often entail some type of special audio or video streaming or interactive connection. It may also involve connecting an online event to

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a related face-to-face event. In this case, the technology needs to be made available at the physical event site to enable this synchronous connection. See references provided above about transformative learning events for more information on this.

- Community Website
 - ◆ Library - hyperlinked repository of shared references, working documents, papers contributed or referenced by community members and designated partners
 - ◆ Shared Learning Journal - indexed reports and summaries from conferences and other events attended by community members, learning expeditions, field trips, exchange programs and other collaborative projects.
 - ◆ Community Directory - hypermedia networking tool that the community and designated partners will use to share and access individual talents.
 - ◆ Outside Expert Directory - annotated directory and connection to outside experts in various fields related to the work of the community
 - ◆ Link Directory - an innovative, hypertext library of links provided by the users, that reflect their discoveries of previously undocumented, meaningful connections and patterns found by the community, and catalogued by themes, date of entry, and user name.
 - ◆ Online Resources - collection of annotated links to resources on the Web, pertinent to, and organized by the interests of the community members
 - ◆ Community Toolkit - evolving set of electronic and conceptual tools to assist community members in their specific work activities
 - ◆ Project Work Areas - special-focus areas, designed to support project teams and other communities of action and commitment, distance mentoring, prototyping, social network mapping, etc.
 - ◆ Event Calendar - annotated listing of events of interest to the community
 - ◆ Distinctionary - alphabetical list of important distinctions to the community; for more about distinctions vs. definitions, see <http://www.workfrontiers.com/distinctionary.html>.
- General Support Tools
 - ◆ Search facility, indices, 2D and 3D sitemaps, tables of contents, and control panels
 - ◆ Usage monitoring and log analysis software
 - ◆ Administrative database
 - ◆ FAQs
 - ◆ User guides & tutorials

The Transformative Journey Ahead

Fostering learning communities isn't difficult when approached as a transformative journey that is an integral part of life rather than a task that needs to be accomplished. Just keep in mind that the people you are working with are human, just like you. They have pretty much the same needs, concerns, and aspirations as you, and respond to caring, concerned support and being allowed to decide their own fate, just like you do. I suggest that before you undertake this journey you and your teammates or fellow community members go through the exercises I have provided in my article, "[*The Experience of Community: Rediscovering Our Shared Humanness Through Community*](#)". Hopefully this will fill in the emotional and intuitive gaps left from the more logical approach outlined in this article.

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*"To learn is to change. Education is a process that changes the learner."
-George Leonard*

*"He who's not busy being born is busy dying."
-Bob Dylan*

*"It is not unusual to find that major changes in life . . . break the patterns of our lives and reveal to us quite suddenly how much we have been imprisoned by the comfortable web we had woven around ourselves. Unlike the jailbird, we don't know that we've been imprisoned until after we've broken out."
-John W. Gardner*