

Beyond Youth Custody

Communities of Practice
in the Effective Resettlement of Young People

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What we know....

- Vast array of agencies potentially involved in C&YPs' lives
- Differing working cultures and practices
- varying professional languages employed
- Resulting in many opportunities for children, young people and families to become lost in a system of resettlement that often struggles to see beyond it's own immediate needs

Collaboration offers a solution to silo-working and differing professional cultures....

- Collaboration is currently being developed in the health and social care sectors, in response to the significant challenges posed by an ageing population and ever-increasing complexities of care and co-morbidities.
- The interpersonal collaborations that can exist across agency boundaries are seen as crucial to realising such organisational and systems changes, aimed at improving the experiences of those accessing care.
- The same issues exist amongst the disparate agencies operating in youth justice
- Collaboration - working together for a common aim - is an equally viable solution to the issues faced in supporting children, young people and families

The vehicles to deliver effective collaboration in youth justice provision are....

- Collaborative Learning Groups
- Communities of Practice

Collaborative Learning Groups....

- a neutral space for practitioners to come together to explore the *process of collaboration* - i.e.
 - While participants will be drawn together through their common interest in improving resettlement provision for children, young people and families, the actual content and facilitated focus of the CLG(s) will be to understand the opportunities and challenges collaboration may present individually, collectively, personally and professionally
- CLGs are semi-formal and organised sessions facilitated to encourage participants to see their own professional roles and contributions within the broader systems of youth justice

Collaborative Learning Groups....

- In this sense CLGs conform to traditional top-down attempts to engage participants in activities of change. In effect, CLGs are specified activities made possible through the hierarchical structures within many organisations
- By understanding that the issues they face are not their issues alone; by understanding that they don't have a monopoly on the frustrations caused by the systemic issues they face; by understanding that others share their concerns for the needs of children, young people and families accessing care, practitioners can emerge from the CLGs committing to work more closely together to explore the issues they face and leading the pursuit for solutions

Collaborative Learning Groups....

- Because they have taken ownership of this process they have vested interests in seeing their efforts succeed through the implementation of identified good practice models that they themselves have identified and developed, *'from the bottom up'*. Effectively they have come together to form their own Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice....

- CoPs on the other hand are focused on the voluntary involvement of members who come together in self-defined and self-selected ways to coalesce around an issue that is common to them all
- At heart, the value of the CoPs will emerge from a steadfast focus on identifying issues which prevent those in receipt of support from making the progress they deem necessary – whether that be issues of language, engagement, inter-agency working or the slow progress of provision, etc
- CoPs may also identify areas of good practice and come together to explore how these may be mainstreamed
- In particular CoPs can come together to focus on the care and support needs of one individual, or they may seek to generate a change that affects service provision more generally

The Case for Change....

- In the 'Knowledge Economy' the challenge for organisations in all sectors is how to tap into the rich resources of experience and ideas that are often trapped amongst the workforce
- Traditionally, knowledge is seen as the preserve of those in positions of senior and strategic leadership - those deemed to have earned the right to set the parameters within which agencies and organisations will function

The Case for Change....

- Organisations will then set in place structures and procedures that are designed to protect the organisation and develop a sense of consistency across the various parties that comprise it. By definition such structures and procedures tend to be quite rigid in their presentation and application – and this is a necessity in order to reduce the space for chaos to reign in complex environments
- The obvious and inherent problem with this arrangement is that there is a wealth of knowledge amongst the workforce – those delivering the services that define the organisation. But the rigid and inflexible structures and procedures often lend themselves better to top-down, organised and narrowly-defined parameters of communication than the potential of myriad conversations about role, purpose and function

The Case for Change....

- This is where Communities of Practice (CoP) can play a useful role in enabling and empowering staff and managers to operate *below the radar* and come together to identify for themselves the everyday issues that cause concern to themselves or those accessing their services. By coming together, members of a CoP call on their own amassed body of knowledge and experience and arrive at solutions that can fix or enhance an issue

'Communities of Practice are not new. They are built on years of observation and research on how adults learn in a work environment. Learning is social. Communities of Practice are the intentional application of how people who care about something that matters learn from and with one another. They are groups of people with a passion for practice, people who share a desire for improvement, or see a problem that they cannot solve alone, or have a solution that will benefit others, and are willing to share their knowledge. CoP's are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they voluntarily interact regularly.' London Leadership Academy (2016)

Communities of Practice are....

- Informal
- exist within as well as between agencies/organisations
- Voluntary
- Self-selected
- Self-directed
- Self-defined

Members are....

- Bound by a common interest or concern
- Are enthusiastic and motivated to work together to find solutions

CoPs can....

- Meet regularly over coffee or lunch
- hold formal meetings
- discuss issues out in the field of practice
- engage in impromptu corridor discussions
- even exist virtually - through emails, teleconferences, one-to-one phone calls or social media groups
- The range of CoP structures and arrangements is as broad as the number of issues that they can explore

'A community of practice may or may not have an explicit agenda on a given week, and even if it does, it may not follow the agenda closely. Inevitably, however, people in communities of practice share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems.' (Wenger and Williams 2000)

'In contrast with more traditional improvement methodologies which tend to be top-down driven, micro-metric managed, and locality specific, Communities of Practice are self-organising, self-managed trans-organisation, collaborative networks.' London Leadership Academy (2016)

A Snapshot Comparison

Communities of practice, formal work groups, teams, and informal networks are useful in complementary ways. Below is a summary of their characteristics.

	What's the purpose?	Who belongs?	What holds it together?	How long does it last?
Community of practice	To develop members' capabilities; to build and exchange knowledge	Members who select themselves	Passion, commitment, and identification with the group's expertise	As long as there is interest in maintaining the group
Formal work group	To deliver a product or service	Everyone who reports to the group's manager	Job requirements and common goals	Until the next reorganization
Project team	To accomplish a specified task	Employees assigned by senior management	The project's milestones and goals	Until the project has been completed
Informal network	To collect and pass on business information	Friends and business acquaintances	Mutual needs	As long as people have a reason to connect

Communities of Practice....

- Members of Communities of Practice can come together because they have individually identified an issue – for example, the fact that referrals to a particular agency rarely get accepted, despite the fact that there have been assessed needs identified. Working in isolation the issue can cause frustration, anger and despair
- Coming together with other practitioners, either from the same or other organisations, can help share the load, provide an outlet for the frustration and a platform to pool experience and knowledge to identify specific solutions

Communities of Practice....

CoPs can generate tools, guidance, methods of engagement, or simply help to collectively identify the locus of the blockage, making it possible for members to go back to their agencies and hold their own discussions about how to engage with that blockage

'The knowledge of experts is an accumulation of experience—a kind of “residue” of their actions, thinking, and conversations—that remains a dynamic part of their ongoing experience. This type of knowledge is much more a living process than a static body of information. Communities of practice do not reduce knowledge to an object. They make it an integral part of their activities and interactions, and they serve as a living repository for that knowledge.' (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002)

i.e. they encourage and embed a culture of learning and practice improvement

Communities of Practice....

There is a notion within CoPs of 'peripherality' (Lave and Wenger 1991) in that members move away from the centre of their own target of practice, for example a YOT or YOI, coming together with other members to form the CoP, where they find the time and space to focus on the issue(s) at hand – the issue(s) that defines their commonality – by pooling their combined knowledge, experiences and enquiries in this peripheral space they have the opportunity to learn together and improve the theory and knowledge of practice.

Communities of Practice....

According to Wenger 1998, Communities of Practice possess three core characteristics:

- **Mutual Engagement**
 - Members establish norms and build collaborative relationships which are the ties that bind members together as a social entity
- **Joint Enterprise**
 - Through their interactions, members create a shared understanding of what binds them together. This is negotiated and re-negotiated and forms the 'domain' of the community
- **Shared Repertoire**

Communities of Practice....

- As part of the practice of the group, the community produces a set of communal resources, termed it's 'shared repertoire' which is used in the pursuit of their joint enterprise. Shared repertoire can be both literal as well a symbolic in meaning.
- CoPs are fundamentally about learning as social participation – this empowers participants to take a lead in their own professional development by taking responsibility for identifying the subject of exploration and collectively, through sharing knowledge and experience in a social participative experience, identifying the solutions which have resonance and meaning to them as practitioners, both individually (to take back to their locus of practice) and collectively (to further define the identity and meaning of the joint enterprise).

Communities of Practice....

Through this social participative experience of self-directed learning, members come to construct a personal and collective sense of identity which can affect their sense of purpose, self-confidence and job satisfaction.

Communities of Practice....

There are three recognised structural principles to effective Communities of Practice, which set out the core function of creating a space of learning in a social environment.

- **Domain**

- o A domain of knowledge creates common ground, inspires members to participate, guides their learning and gives meaning to their actions – essentially, along with ‘Practice’, below, forms an informal set of terms of reference – a reason and purpose for the CoP’s existence.

Communities of Practice....

- **Community**

- o The notion of a community creates the social fabric for that learning. A strong community fosters interactions and encourages a willingness to share ideas within the realms of the Domain.

- **Practice**

- o If the Domain is the general area of interest (for example resettlement), the practice is the more specific focus that sharpens the community's attention (for example accommodation); or accommodation (domain) and engaging private landlords (practice); etc. The practice is the focus around which the community develops, shares, produces and maintains its core knowledge.

(Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002)

Communities of Practice....

McDermott and Snyder 2002 identified the following key characteristics of Communities of Practice:

- A community of practice is often organically created, with as many objectives as members of that community
- Community membership is defined by the knowledge of the members.
- CoP membership changes and members may take on new roles within the community as interests and needs arise.
- A community of practice can exist as long as the members believe they have something to contribute to it, or gain from it.

Communities of Practice....

- A CoP is a group of people who are active practitioners – in other words, membership is not open to people who are not actively involved in the practice issues(s) being explored
- CoP participation is not appropriate for non-practitioners, who may be better suited to a Community of Interest.
- The purpose of a CoP is to provide a way for practitioners to share tips and best practices, ask questions of their colleagues and provide support for each other
- Membership is dependent on expertise – one should have at least some recent experience performing in the role or subject area of the CoP

Communities of Practice....

The social capital (Bourdieu 1991) gained through membership and participation in a CoP may provide value to both the individual and group as a whole. Members build interpersonal, informal relationships with other members, sharing knowledge, ideas, experiences, fears and aspirations. These connections enhance and define both the constituents and the whole. They have a sense of community, a place to go to seek support and have their voice heard; a space away from practice colleagues which can promote a sense of empowerment, confidence, safety and identity. When members experience issues in their practice, they have a place they can go.

Communities of Practice....

Duguid (2005) identified the role of CoPs in bridging the gap between theory and practice, a function that sets out effective practitioners from others. He discusses the difference between 'tacit' and 'explicit' knowledge – the former representing the '*knowing how*' while the latter represents the '*knowing what*' aspects of knowledge.

Being able to function effectively in a job role, according to Duguid (2002) is a result of the bridging of the two, and Communities of Practice provide an effective vehicle for members to develop the ability to do so. Members pool their knowledge and experience in exploring an issue(s) and then identifying reasonable and useful, often transferable solutions – theory to practice.