

Mid-life CoPs: Experiences and Alignment

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Abstract: Several of the Communities of Practices (CoP) Alterra/Wing manages have reached their mid-life. Designed CoPs have come to life and have achieved alignment, from which we can learn. A growing interest can be signalled in using CoPs as management instruments and in governance. Governments are seeking new ways in policy making and new steering instruments. Using the case of agrologistics we describe how the Dutch government has used a CoP for complex planning and organizational problems. The social design, planning and management of a new CoP have linked together a wide range of stakeholders to establish a operational CoP. Alignment is a key factor in this transition to self-steering; the value of belonging is very powerful. Masters play an important role in setting up and in steering the CoP. CoPs can be developed as new instruments of governance, based on the theoretical concept of CoP.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, learning process, knowledge management, lifecycle, interactive learning, governance, process facilitation, public networks

Categories: A, A1, A2

1 Introduction

In this paper we will report on our experiences with the Community of Practice (CoP). Some of our CoPs are in their mid-life phase and their potential and weaknesses as management instruments are clearly visible. The alignment and development of the social learning process indicates people's expectations of CoP management. Using a government-driven CoP as a case study we investigate the steering conditions and the expected impact on changes in society. Our experiences with the CoP can be seen as a combination of practice and theory-driven activities. In our experience, a management-driven creation of a new CoP as an act of governance can start an operational CoP, and the CoP's members soon take over the steering of the process and content of operational practices. As a result, the CoP becomes based on internal alignment, and the initial management merely facilitates the proceedings.

2 Growing interest for CoPs as management tools

The theoretical concept of the CoP (Wenger, 1998; Kersten, 2002; Kranendonk, 2004, CPSquare Workshops 2004, 2005) can be used as a management tool. Alterra/Wing has applied it in several cases, both in companies and semi-governmental environments. Designing CoPs on the basis of theory can be successful: the CoPs planned by management as new ways of working show patterns of development identical to those of CoPs emerging from free engagement in domain interests. The participants in CoPs experience social learning as an open invitation, regardless of the management conditions that have brought them together. They participate in the CoP in accordance with how we would expect them to behave on the basis of theory. The phases of the theoretical life cycle of CoPs can also be seen in planned CoPs. Not government but members themselves decide about being a CoP.

In recent years the CoP concept has ended up being applied in government policies to stimulate innovation. Based on Etienne Wenger's writings (1997, 2002), additional theories of social learning and the link to shifting management methods (Jauch and Glueck 1984, Mintzberg 1989, Prahalad 1994, Senge 1994, Nonaka et al 1995, Mertins et al, 2003), a checklist for designing and creating CoPs has been put into practice (Kersten et al, 2002). These pilot schemes initially generated new ideas about what to expect, but also had a practical impact on the domains in which the CoP-activities took place.

In the Netherlands, the government has experimented with CoPs to implement policy targets, by collaborating on a policy domain under innovative conditions. CoPs were seen as a perfect condition to invite stakeholder participation to achieve new policy targets. Initially, these CoPs were artificial constructions, designed merely for the purpose of achieving government targets. As soon as these CoPs came to life, their organisation was gradually taken over as the result of internal alignment, and the original management gave way to more interactive steering conditions. Creative management turned to the facilitation of the next phase in the process, aiming to support practices and activities now dominated by the CoP's members.

Whatever the motivation of the management, the most important requirement in the process is engagement of the participants in debates. The theoretical context of the CoP provides a structure to stimulate this engagement from within the CoP through participation, as well as from deliberate management of the CoP proceedings. This results in a process of social learning and creates new relationships between the government and the CoP members and also society. The active guidance of these changes has proved to be an instrument of management.

Given that new management approaches tend to change every five years, CoPs are now in their mid-life of attention. In publications we see a change from creating knowledge about the conceptual framework of CoPs, to the input of experiences, management techniques and practical ways of planning and creating CoPs.

3 Experiences with CoPs set up to tackle problems in rural Netherlands

3.1 Introduction

For some years, changes driven by economic growth have been taking place in the rural area of the Netherlands. They involve residential development, increasing business activity, the expanding of infrastructure and hydrological engineering and flood control. They have greatly increased the pressure on space (Dammers, 1999).

The problems in the rural area are complex because the trends in Dutch society are interrelated with the demand for space and the constraints imposed by ecological processes. This implies that the perception of the problem and the direction in which the solutions are sought are subject to debate and that the commitment and accountability of public and private players are changing rapidly. Many policy problems in the Netherlands are complex, dynamic, multidimensional and non-linear. This leads to questions such as: how can we learn to combine all these different spatial claims and come to new innovative solutions with high quality of spatial design and integrated use?

The Dutch government is searching for new ways of working with society and has therefore set up pilot CoPs, such as the CoP to work out the concept of multiple land-use from Habiforum, a semi-governmental agency for development of innovative spatial concepts. A new concept of dealing with the scarcity of space has been experienced at various levels by a range of experts in theory and in practical applications.

In this chapter we present a case description of designing and facilitating the Agrologistics CoP (4.2).

3.2 Case: experiences with CoP in Agrologistics

Many changes are taking place in the production of raw material, the market for Dutch agribusiness, and in government efforts to keep the Netherlands as an attractive country for establishing agribusiness. One of the main topics of interest is agrologistics: the transport, storing, trans-shipment and warehousing of agricultural produce and products. The distribution phase is an important part of the agricultural production column: agricultural products account for over 20% of goods traffic and the proportion is still growing. The Netherlands also plays an important role in the transit of agricultural products and foods, especially to the European hinterland. Over 14% of all the country's transits are of agrofood products. The agrosector is greatly oriented towards road transport: 52% compared to 22% for all goods. One in three lorries transports agrofood products.

Speed and security are crucial. The accessibility of locations is a problem (especially in the last part of the chain,) as are the traffic jams in the Netherlands and in neighbouring countries. The need for speed also makes high demands on the speed of inspection and on the collaboration between the food inspectors and logistic companies. Agrologistics is about solving an organisational, spatial and collaboration problem. To overcome these problems the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food and the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management are collaborating on the topic of agrologistics. In a research report three strategies have

been developed: cluster forming, linking businesses, and strengthening of direction. This requires new innovative concepts, such as Fresh Centers - where suppliers and logistic companies combine their forces - and multimodal transport systems. For agrologistics this also means that 'logistics' will be more important than 'agro'. Speedy supplies (e.g. of spare parts) are very important, and breaking through the branch boundaries offers opportunities for applying new logistic concepts more broadly (RLG, 2001).

This agrologistics project is a good example of governance. It is a complex project, which government cannot solve alone. To develop new solutions, various forms of knowledge (policy, scientific, business) and experience should be brought together in a collaborative action between government, the market, scientists and society.

In 2003, ten concrete pilot projects were selected. These will be supported not by subsidies but by communication, marketing, education and advice. To overcome the sectoral boundaries we decided to stimulate a social learning process. So, various players (for example: civil servants, the agricultural sector, the logistics sector, project leaders, scientists and consultants) were brought together. They all shared the experience of developing new ways of handling these strategies and of having to cope with the different meanings of agrologistics and trends in agrologistics. In this way, the common domain was set. The participants also decided to form an Agrologistics Community of Practice. This meeting was the start of the social learning process.

Alterra/Wing facilitates the CoP. The principles of the concept of the CoP (Wenger, 1998) have been translated into a process design. We have organised two 24-hour creative 'working studios', with the following elements:

- Community forming: stimulating getting to know each other by exchanging experiences, shared practice, eating dinner together and going on an excursion;
- Creating new common meaning: by exchanging knowledge and experiences, hiring specialists and experts, using creative techniques and imagination, to move beyond 'business as usual';
- Creating common identity: building up a CoP, creating new common projects and networks, sending the CoP out in the wide world, building up a website;
- Common practice: taking common initiatives, exercises, design, interpretation, excursion, discussion.

The creative working studios have a central theme chosen by the core group of the CoP. The theme must connect all the different projects. Examples are marketing and branding, organisational concepts, knowledge management, policy issues. All projects have something to do with those themes. The theme is used in various ways. Participants are asked to contribute by describing their experiences, specialists are invited to introduce the theme and Alterra organises some shared activity to work with the theme, create common meaning, create an agenda and set up new communal projects.

The creative working studios take place in a hotel near one of the pilot projects, so that people are removed from their daily environment and routines. Imagination is

strengthened by visiting the new environment, the spatial concept of the pilot project and the various thoughts, ideas and stories of the project. To stimulate the various learning processes we distinguish three master roles:

- Master of process: engagement in the CoP can be stimulated by strengthening the organisation and the processes within it (network). Mutuality has to be stimulated, by creating physical and virtual interactions, communal tasks and activities and by involving various levels and views. Also important in stimulating mutuality are the competence of the participants (initiative, inventiveness, creativity) and continuity (knowledge management and documentation).
- Master of innovation: strengthening the power of imagination will support the creation of innovative plans and the generation of solutions for the object of planning (use of creative techniques and a communal working process). Imagination plays an important role in reaching a higher level, making the step from global to local, and stimulating learning processes. The power of imagination can be stimulated by enlarging the participants' orientation, knowledge and experience. Reification can be very important. Creating new symbols, logos, definitions and notions will unite the members.
- Master of learning and development: the processes in the CoP have to be directed: for example, the roles of people and changes in their behaviour (social learning process). So, common meaning, vision and plans have to be stimulated and promoted.

The learning processes in the CoP are facilitated by masters. In the Agrologistics CoP the master of process stimulates the interaction between people from different backgrounds in the creative 'working studios'. The participants have various interactions and exchanges, communal practices and tasks. So, they learn new ways of handling their problems. Together they are challenged to obtain and practise new techniques – of marketing and branding, for example. The group builds its own social history. The various contributions and the reports of the practices are recorded.

In the creative 'working studios' the masters use various creative techniques to develop new ways of dealing with problems of Agrologistics, like open space technology, mind mapping, design techniques, discussion techniques and thinking exercises like association, conversion/diversion. The masters also expose problems and themes from different points of view, explore experiences in other sectors (airport business developments), other countries (China) and try to develop a common meaning for the problems the CoP is faced with.

The master of learning and development stimulates the alignment and the direction of the innovative outcomes from the Agrologistics CoP by using the boundary processes, coordination and planning processes, and harmonising with the wider world (organisations and processes). In the creative work studio the CoP is inward-oriented, but to fit the solutions to the wider world there must be an alternation between looking inward and outward. This can be stimulated. The CoP has to send enthusiasm, identity and new meaning into the wider world but also test these and search for synchronisation and matching with the wider world. The person who is the master looks for ways to achieve this and develops strategies with the participants.

Within the Agrologistics CoP the participants are seen as the innovators in the sector. They get attention from the media and from the decision makers in the sector. The ministers of the government departments involved recently promised to provide space for experiments to accelerate the innovation process.

4 Observations

From our experiences with government-driven CoPs that have been deliberately planned and managed we can identify the following characteristics:

- Initial disagreement by the CoP's participants on the object domain. The first three meetings of the CoP always consist of narrowing the field of the subject, sharing opinions and perceptions on this domain area. Only seldom is a common feeling about the urge to invest in this domain a reason for collaboration.
- These designed CoPs generally entail totally different people from totally different backgrounds being thrown together. The lack of a shared experience leads to discussions on principles to provide confidence and trust: the process of social learning. A lack of trust will lead to a lack of willingness to be open to a learning environment. To overcome this barrier in the start-up phase, management is needed.
- The preparation and startup time of the CoP demotivates the participants. They will begin to lose an overview of the implications of their participation. In this phase, coaches can play an important role.
- The planning and policy processes in the rural area are based largely on perceptions. In the initial phase, the exchange of these perceptions has a personal impact. The harmonisation in the early stages of the CoP can be facilitated by masters of process and masters of innovation, because emotions tend to run high. This harmonisation results in a new domain perception being built up, more shared by all participants.
- The rapid change in the object domain is the main reason for participating in the CoP. Certain shared characteristics tend to strengthen ties between participants: uncertainty, initial chaos, lots of intuitive feelings in the early stages, and the need to explore new working methods. Participants very soon establish a clear allocation of roles and a clear pattern of activities
- In a mid-stage a call for reification of the results of the CoP emerges, sometimes long before the practical and concrete results are reached. The need to tell the outside world what the CoP is doing becomes so pressing that more energy is put into this communication than in proceeding with the work.
- CoPs are areas with freedom of thought and experimental potential. They exist next to formal functions and institutional accountability. They are seen as temporary and very precious: a social environment of high value that is a bonus on the normal working environment. CoPs never give the status and stability of the normal working structure. Going outside the CoP, then, is always returning to business as usual.
- The relation with the outer world is crucial for the CoP. Within the CoP a common frame of reference will be developed. This means discontinuity with

people outside the CoP. In the concept of the CoP a rhythm of locality and boundary takes a central place. CoPs develop ways of maintaining connections with the rest of the world. After being in the community, the ideas and plans will be communicated to and shared with people outside the CoP. There, the ideas and plans can be tested in terms of their political, financial, spatial and legal feasibility or in terms of the opinions and experiences of the inhabitants of rural areas.

5 Conclusions

We would like to share with you our five main conclusions:

1. The theoretical concept of the CoP works well in complex problem environments. It provides a good working structure and is experienced in practice. CoPs can link a wide range of stakeholders in abstract government topics.

The CoP concept is applied to several complex problems and innovation processes. We have tried to develop a common domain and have focused on four elements: practice, identity, community and meaning. Learning processes have been stimulated and the management tried to develop rhythms inside outside the CoP. To make progress we have stimulated engagement, imagination and alignment. We have come to the conclusion that the CoP concept is very powerful, it works:

- Participants experience social learning structures very easily. We create environments where people feel comfortable and rise to the challenge of optimising the use of their own qualities, inspirations and initiatives.
- The elements of the concept are all experienced in real practice. Identity develops more slowly than other elements and it takes some time for unusual working structures, thoughts and solutions to become part of people's mindset and on the agenda.
- CoP thinking quickly provides a structure in which participants can do the things they would like to do and things they're good at.

After an initial, sometimes difficult introduction, the CoP has often been experienced as the perfect organisation in which to experiment, explore new policy making and the boundaries of complexity in product development and personal involvement. CoP members have created their own alignment and taken over the steering of the CoP. They have mobilised internal powers and allocated roles so the CoP will take off. The initial management has been delegated to external facilitation and observing the proceedings. The participation of initial management within the CoP is important, as it serves as a permanent reminder of the mission of the founder.

2. Alignment, belonging and intimacy are very powerful parameters of a CoP. They are underestimated in planning and policy processes.

- Social learning in the CoP depends on members communicating interactively and sharing emotions. Alignment, belonging, rewarding and intimacy are

important success factors for a CoP. If these are missing, the designed CoP cannot continue. When management keeps a firm hand on the direction of the internal process, the members hesitate to come forward and no bonding occurs.

- In professional management, too, intimacy and trust are key factors in the restyling of the designed CoP into an operational CoP. The CoP members are well aware that in professional relations based on trust it is possible to develop new creative and innovative activities too.
- The decision to put knowledge and experience in the group process is a fragile moment, often experienced by several members at the same time. Members in designed CoPs continuously review these emotions as the basis of staying on and participating.

Many other conditions influence the development of intimacy and alignment. Important issues to keep the CoP going are interpersonal relations, external stimulation and senses of urgency and progress.

The attention to non-material conditions is a very strong aspect of the CoP concept. When those conditions fail, social learning does not occur. The design of a new CoP should pay much attention to creating intimacy and alignment - not by direct means, but by creating the right conditions for members to experience these feelings. Successful transition from an initial designed CoP is achieved by members, not by management.

3. The Master roles function especially well when the masters integrate in the CoP and in the activities. If the masters distance themselves they do not empathise sufficiently with the CoP.

In contrast with the idea of 'originating CoPs' (Wenger et al., 2002), we have found that masters can contribute in setting up and steering CoPs by strengthening engagement, imagination and direction. We distinguish three Master-Roles: of Process, of Innovation, and of Learning and Development. Masters are distinct from managers, because masters integrate in the CoP. Masters have the following characteristics:

- They should participate in the rituals of the CoP. They too learn by doing and by participating. They should also send out the identity of the CoP in the wider world.
- Masters too should 'learn to belong'.
- Initially, Masters are always 'better' than the rest. They deserve this special position because of their status (special competence, qualities and networks).
- Masters can participate once or several times in the CoP. Certain expertise can be helpful at a certain stage of the learning process. Because of their status they will influence the direction of the learning processes in the CoP if they are inspirational.
- Like all the other participants Masters will gain a unique role. Not only the masters but the CoP as an entity will decide on direction taken by the CoP.

Our experiences with CoPs indicate that master roles should be institutionalised to ensure that CoPs start up quickly and successfully. Once a CoP has got going and

alignment has taken place, it will soon function as a normal CoP, organising and deciding about its own learning process.

4. CoP is very appropriate for abstract regional planning and policy domains and other complex domains of governance.

The Netherlands government has to deal with a shortage of geographical space, plus a multitude of environmental and spatial problems involving various stakeholders, knowledge domains, interests and ownerships. The challenge is to overcome these different personal interests and create communality.

- Facilitation of CoPs by masters can lead to a domain and a social configuration in which individuals 'lose' their personal and particular connections with the outer world in collaborative outcomes. An observation is that participants from formal working structures are affected by the energy and flow of working in a CoP.
- The complex planning and policy domains have many viewpoints and subjects. When the CoP works out ideas, we see the problem being broken down into sub problems that are tackled in sub groups. This opens up new directions for future developments.
- The participants' background (knowledge and experience) influences the choices made by the CoP.

The great variety of stakeholders means that a CoP has a different starting point compared with an activity that has a clear and shared domain and engaged people. We expected that starting up a new CoP could specifically lead to mutual understanding and discovery of common interests and that as a result, the diverse participants would change into engaged members of the CoP. Complexity is diverted into sub-themes, leaving the abstract context behind, in search of practice.

5. Conditional steering strengthens the emergence and performance of CoPs.

In the Netherlands the use of conditional steering by CoP techniques is still in its early stages. The case of agrolistics shows some promising results but also conflicts with former concepts of steering. The impact of CoPs on behavioural change and maintenance exceeds the results of the more traditional steering instruments.

- Governments can create conditions for the emergence of CoP's.
- In CoPs the government can discover how to deal with complex problems.
- The feeling of 'invented here' makes the concepts strong in the perception of the participants. They become the proponents of the concept; the government can be one of the participants.
- As soon as CoP results become clear, the government tends to redefine conditions to bring them more in line with the outcomes they would like the CoP to have.
- Many discussions on the Return on Investment operate as a restraint on the internal dynamics of the CoP.

Conditional steering fits onto principles such as self-organisation and new ecologies of learning (Snowden, 2004). It separates the management of context (process) from content (object) and participants (subject). It shapes the conditions for the growth of a CoP. Conditional steering improves effectiveness and reducing time to the deployment of Knowledge Management solutions and improves application of complexity theory to organisational decision making, governance and the steering of society.

First experiences with several mid-life CoPs are stimulating. CoPs can be designed and at the same time work according to the conceptual framework. For their continuation and proceedings, special conditions for management and government are essential. Their members keep on re-evaluating the meaning, practice, community and identity of the CoP. The government, meanwhile, concentrates on the CoP's results and the outcome of its activities. The challenge in the next phase in the life-cycle of CoPs as management tools is to bridge these interests.

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