



Communities of Practice: Bridging Practice and Learning

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In recent years, the concept of “Communities of Practice” (COP) has appeared on the Continuing Medical Education scene. What does this expression really mean? Since physicians increasingly practise less on their own, can we then say that physicians practising in groups belong to a COP?

The answer is, “no”. For the majority of physicians who practise in a community clinic or hospital setting, even if they are members of a multi-disciplinary team, each practises in the realm of his own specific expertise. This expertise is shared in the context of formal meetings, such as case discussions (pre- and post-clinic) or at the request of a formal medical consultation.

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Therefore, the majority of physicians practising in a group, are subjected to a dynamic environment. Each exercises his practice juxtaposed to a colleague: mathematically, we can illustrate traditional practice groups with a simple equation ($1 + 1 + 1 = 3$).

Operating in a COP is based on a true group dynamic and the end result, when illustrated mathematically, becomes $1 + 1 + 1 = 5$.

In a COP, above and beyond the clinical work and operating the clinic’s activities, everything is put in place to ensure the community “learns” from its practice and grows as a professional group. The passion of a common focus is the key driving force behind each professional’s involvement in the clinic.

The sharing of expertise occurs not only during formal meetings, but especially outside the meeting environment, where a systematic exchange of expertise takes place. Tacit knowledge, (know-how, clinical judgment, clinical experience) is captured, shared, and analyzed to

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enable the community to grow.

The professionals who operate in a COP notice the multiplier effect of being together in the group, and they are conscious of the professional benefits they derive (satisfaction, continuing professional development, *etc.*).

It is through nursing literature, and the world of education during the 1980s, that we find the concept and models behind COP. Large, private corporations widely use this same model to leverage each professional's formal knowledge, know-how, analytical know-how, and attitudes, on a systematic basis.

The concept of COP provides an important opportunity for trainers and organizers of

Continuing Professional Education in our Canadian universities. We can combine our knowledge, expertise in research, pedagogy, knowledge, and human resource management and put them into practice, in real-time, to support the work of the professionals we have trained and to ensure they maintain their competence in a collaborative learning context.

COP: where practice and continued learning become inseparable. [CME](#)

Suggested Readings

1. Wenger E: Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
2. COP Pilot Project at www.cme.umontreal.ca/english (accessed May 10, 2004)
3. Parboosingh JT: Physician communities of practice. J Cont Edu Health Prof 2002; 22(4):230-6.

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