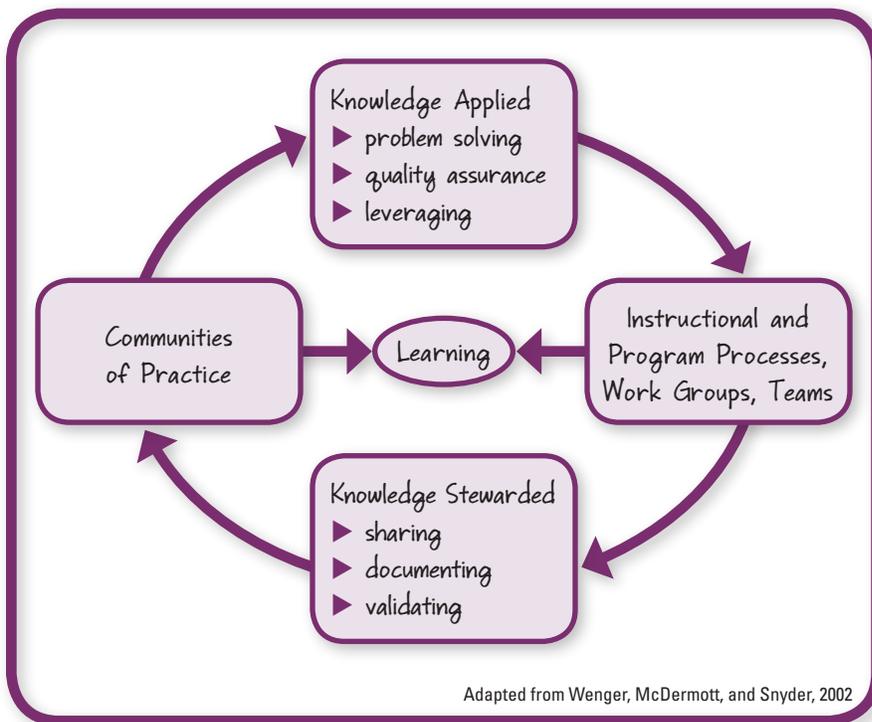


Tapping Online Professional Development

Through Communities of Practice: Examples from the NIFL Discussion Lists

By Jackie Taylor

Jackie Taylor is
moderator of the Adult
Literacy Professional
Development Discussion
List: <http://www.nifl.gov/mailman/listinfo/Professionaldevelopment>



Communities Through the National Institute for Literacy

Since its creation in 1991, the National Institute for Literacy has provided national leadership on adult literacy. In 1998, with the addition of funds for dissemination of scientifically based reading research, the Institute has been a catalyst for improving opportunities for adults, youth, and children to thrive in a progressively literate world. The Institute's discussion lists are forums that give adult literacy practitioners and researchers opportunities to discuss the field's critical issues; share resources, experiences, and ideas; ask questions of subject experts; and keep up-to-date on literacy issues (NIFL, nd).

When the discussion lists were established in 1995, they were designed to

- + increase access to electronic information for adult educators
- + provide a forum for discussion of adult literacy-related policy
- + provide an important link to connect the work of the Institute with the field (NIFL, Original goals of the Institute's lists)

Today, the Institute's discussion lists

- + bring together in common dialogue separate communities with mutual interests
- + promote professional information sharing
- + enable sharing of international perspectives and research
- + enable teachers, tutors, and other practitioners to learn about the issues, challenges, satisfactions, and successes of adult literacy education

- provide opportunities for field-driven professional development (NIFL, Purposes of the Institute's lists)

When the nation was just waking up to the availability of the Internet, the Institute seized the opportunity and this new technology for connecting the adult literacy community online. Working through its Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS), the Institute's discussion lists were among the first few offered on the Internet by federal government agencies and educational organizations, according to Jaleh Behrooz Soroui, former LINCS Web site director. LINCS, considered the backbone of the Institute's dissemination system, provides information on a variety of literacy-relevant topics, issues, and high-quality resources.

The discussion lists began with a focus on four literacy topics—ESL, learning disabilities, workplace, and family—and evolved as the Institute explored other ways to serve the needs of subscribers online. The lists began providing practitioners with a forum to share expertise and knowledge and to ask their colleagues for help. This was especially important for those who could not access professional development.

Historically, subscribers have used the lists to

- problem solve
- request or receive information
- seek others' teaching or learning experiences
- introduce, discuss, and develop projects and resources

- introduce field experts and dialogue with them about their work
- raise awareness of and debate key issues important to the field
- plan, preview, and report on sessions held at national conferences
- identify who has knowledge and learn about our field's knowledge gaps

Some would call groups engaged in this kind of activity "communities of practice" (CoPs).

According to Etienne Wenger, pioneer in communities of practice research, communities of practice are

Groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and they learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

CoPs share a common interest and commitment to that interest that distinguish them from others, they engage in joint learning activities (whether intentional or not), they build relationships that enable them to learn from one another, and they strive to improve what they do (Wenger, nd).

Thus, the Institute's lists have evolved from simple topic-based "listservs" into communities of practice.

What Do Communities of Practice Do?

Communities of practice build the "knowledge base" of the field. The

2003 Snapshot of Subscribers

Who uses the Institute's communities of practice? In an evaluation of the lists

Subscribers:

- 13% teachers/tutors
- 11% state administrators and managers
- 11% researchers
- 11% high school, college, and graduate students
- 37% program directors, managers, or coordinators

Subscribers' affiliations:

- 52% ABE programs
- 17% federal or state government agencies
- 15% state literacy resource centers
- 15% national literacy organizations

72% of subscribers have been professionally involved with adult education/literacy for over 5 years, 57% for over 10 years.

RMC Research Corporation (2005)

community stewards knowledge sharing, critically reflecting, documenting, validating, innovating, and creating. The "practice" applies this knowledge through problem solving and, well, practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Thus, community members work collaboratively across locations (and even across disciplines) to support one another in improving practice.

Communities of practice

- cut across programs, states, and countries
- are ongoing learning venues for practitioners who share common goals, interests, and challenges

Types of Groups and Tasks

Type of Group	Task
Business units	Shape the organizations
Teams	Develop projects
Networks	Form relationships
Communities of practice	Develop knowledge that lets them perform the other tasks listed above. Make organizations effective and possible.

- + respond rapidly for that just-in-time need
- + share, document, and cultivate knowledge
- + develop, capture, and share promising practices
- + promote innovative approaches
- + influence outcomes by promoting greater and better informed dialogue
- + link diverse groups of practitioners across disciplines (World Bank, nd)

So Are Communities of Practice Just “Listservs”?

No, although they can start out that way, as the Institute’s lists did. CoPs differ from other communities. While a group, like a neighborhood, may be a community, it may not be a community of practice. According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), three critical elements must be present for a community to be a CoP:

1. *Domain*

Members have a shared knowledge domain or area—like ESOL, technology, or health literacy. These members interact regularly to address details of daily practice

while also working toward a shared vision. They collaborate for larger purposes:

- + What do we really care about as a community?
- + How is our purpose here going to advance the field?
- + How is it connected to our programs’ strategies?

2. *Community*

Members have a shared sense of community and trust. They can answer these questions:

- + What are our shared interests?
- + How will we advance them?
- + How will we connect in order to do that?
- + How will we interact and develop trust?

3. *Practice*

Members develop professionally as individuals and as they work together to advance the field of practice. They consider these questions:

- + How will this advance our own learning?
- + What knowledge will we share?
- + How will learning be documented, and who will document it?
- + What learning activities will we organize?
- + What projects should we jointly do?
- + What sources of expertise will we tap?

Thus communities of practice are critical to programs and professional development and to advancing the adult literacy field. From the Institute’s original four discussion lists evolved 10 communities of practice with distinct visions and expertise, diverse

skills, varied perspectives—each dedicated to advancing its particular “domain” of practice:

- + Adult English Language Learners
- + Adult Literacy Professional Development
- + Assessment
- + Diversity and Literacy
- + Family Literacy
- + Health Literacy
- + Learning Disabilities
- + Special Topics
- + Technology and Literacy
- + Workplace Literacy

A professional with content-specific expertise moderates each Institute community. Practitioners subscribe (free) to their community or communities of choice. To post, subscribers send e-mail messages to the discussion list.

With the exception of the Special Topics list, the discussion lists are open for subscribers to post messages anytime. The Special Topics list differs in that it is an “intermittent” list. Subscribers post messages only during periods when the moderator schedules special topics discussions.

Each community of practice engages in different activities based on subscribers’ interests and needs. This “nonformal” education approach is

- + grassroots
- + inclusive and participatory
- + participant-centered
- + hands-on and practical

Moderators formatively assess needs and schedule discussion list events three to four times each year. They often bring in key experts as guests or schedule periods to

discuss seminal works in the field. The Institute keeps an updated schedule of events at http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_events.html.

During discussions, subscribers ask questions of guests and of each other and share strategies and resources. Some moderators (and others) compile, archive, and summarize both scheduled and spontaneous discussions in the Adult Literacy Education (ALE) Wiki (http://wiki.literacyent.org/index.php/Main_Page) as well as posting them on the Institute's Web site (http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_events.html).

The Institute's discussion lists, together with the ALE Wiki, are tools that enable the adult literacy communities of practice to be more useful and accessible to their members.

What Does Participation “Look Like” in Online Communities of Practice?

Subscribing to a list doesn't automatically mean you are a member of a CoP. Members of CoPs actively participate by reading or posting, sharing and adapting, applying and improving, reflecting and sharing their reflections, collaborating and assisting others.

Ways Subscribers Participate

Subscribers engage in many types of activities. You can find a list of sample practices, examples, and links to the resources collected or created by subscribers by visiting http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_docs/participate08.doc.

How Do Participants Use the Institute's Communities of Practice as Professional Development?

Many subscribers use the Institute's communities of practice to improve what they do, no matter their role: teacher, volunteer tutor, learner leader, program administrator, state director, state staff member, professional development staff, and others in related fields. Thus, some consider their participation in these communities as “professional development.”

How Do I Get Started?

1. Subscribe to one or more of the National Institute for Literacy's adult literacy discussion lists by visiting http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/subscribe_all.html. You will receive an automated welcome message that will ask you to confirm your subscription by clicking on a link within the message.
2. Post an introduction message to the list: name, role, and reasons why you subscribed. Or write the moderator directly and share your professional interests in the community's domain.
3. Add the discussion list address to your e-mail program's “accepted senders” list so that posts do not end up in your bulk mail folder.
4. Explore the discussion list home page. Learn options for customizing your subscription, such as “digest” format. Digest allows you to receive posts “bundled” into one or two e-mails per day.

Protect Online Learning Time

Adult Literacy Professional Development Discussion List subscribers have suggested the following strategies for protecting online learning time:

- Establish dedicated time for online learning: regular times to read and reflect.
 - Set attainable weekly benchmarks.
 - Create a study plan.
 - Practice a phone-off policy.
 - Hang a friendly sign on the door, such as a “study hat.”
 - Ask your supervisor to help you protect your learning time at work.
 - Find ways to do professional development learning in small “chunks”; that is, read, reflect, and discuss in small segments.
 - Discuss the issues explored in your online communities of practice with colleagues at work. Report back and tell online participants what your face-to-face colleagues think.
5. For tips on posting messages to the Institute's lists, visit http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_docs/tips08.doc.
 6. To think about how you might use the lists in a professional development plan, visit http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_docs/plan08.doc.
 7. For ideas on how you might demonstrate what you learned by participating in the Institute's communities of practice, visit http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_docs/projects08.doc.

8. To learn how you might use the communities of practice for program-based professional development, visit http://wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/Program-Based_Professional_Development.
9. Protect your time to learn online. While online professional development (“anytime PD”) is convenient, it’s easily subsumed by other responsibilities.
10. For more information, contact Jackie Taylor at jackie@jataylor.net.
The Institute’s online communities of practice are a mainstay of the adult literacy field. They build leaders, inform outcomes by strengthening dialogue, and build literacy advocates.

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At a Glance: Online Resources for CoPs and PD

Adult Literacy Education (ALE) Wiki	
ideas for using CoPs for program-based PD	http://wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/Program-Based_Professional_Development
topics (including archived list discussions)	http://wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/Main_Page
National Institute for Literacy Discussion Lists	
archives of past discussions	http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_events.html , http://wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/Main_Page
demonstrating what you learned from participating	http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_docs/projects08.doc
general information	http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/discussions.html
sample practices, examples, and links to subscriber-contributed resources	http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_docs/participate08.doc
schedule of upcoming events	http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_events.html
subscribing	http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/subscribe_all.html
tips on posting	http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_docs/tips08.doc
using the lists in a PD plan	http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/list_docs/plan08.doc
For More Information	
e-mail Jackie Taylor	jackie@jataylor.net

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