



COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE INTRODUCTION

Please read this document with the resource: *What are Communities of Practice.*

WHAT IS THE YANUZ VIEW ON COP?

We have experienced that a community of practice (COP) is one valuable enabler and accelerator to facilitate and drive social innovation. It builds the social innovation ecosystem to enable social change.

Communities of practice describe a social learning pathway where people voluntarily commit to improve a common concern around a complex social challenge. Its members interact regularly to learn and to co-create innovative solutions.

The COP is determined by an active and open learning environment that allows for eye-level exchange and a participatory approach. It leads to action towards social innovation that is openly shared and can be applied in practice. For us, the COP is an instrument for education to anticipate contemporary challenges and gives a structure for lifelong learning.

WHAT IS THE YANUZ COP USP?

The way learning and cocreation is organised through YANUZ communities of practice is opposed to classical knowledge-to-action approaches and more generic public health initiatives. It demands the necessity of the direct involvement and true engagement of end-users and from there the formulation of a common agenda; respectively, no specific outcome targets are set in advance.

Another specific of the YANUZ communities of practice approach is its connectivity with higher education. For us, communities of practice determine an ideal playground to bring together educational innovators from formal, non-formal and informal learning environments to enable and empower educators and learners to anticipate for the future and challenge the status quo as change agents.

It means that students and educators determine an important target group of our capacity-building programmes. Our aim is to empower higher education institutions and their students to develop the right mindset and skills to resolve the complex challenges of healthy lifestyle.

WHAT IS THE AIM AND USE OF COP?

Communities of practice are often also called learning communities or learning networks. They aim to build intentional relationships between like-minded actors to accelerate shared learning, collaborative problem-solving, and collective action. Communities of Practice are often used as forums for the exploration of ideas,





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experimentation, analysis, reflection, and capacity building that is essential to driving social impact.

COP can provide a social container or social innovation environment or learning and cocreation environment. This allows for linking and learning between practitioners, knowledge producers and policy processes to analyse, address and explore solutions to problems. They can bring together a range of perspectives on a problem and ensure that relevant knowledge is accessible to those who need it.

Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. They are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.

HOW ARE COP STRUCTURED?

COP may take different forms, depending on their size; their homogeneity or heterogeneity (whether they involve a single discipline or several); their scope, both internal (professionals from the same team) and external (clients, partners, etc.); whether they arise spontaneously or are planned; and their relationship with the organization (invisible, unacknowledged until they are institutionalized).

Irrespective of their various forms, COP share basic features. The first is a field of knowledge or a theme that is defined through complexity and determines their *raison d'être*. In our case it is healthy lifestyle. The latter is the common concern that brings and keeps the individuals together, guides their learning and defines the identity of the community.

HOW ARE COP KICKSTARTED AND RUN?

The key for running COP is to foster their development and running, rather than trying to control them. Because they are about learning, not about fulfilling mandated tasks, they will thrive only when members find them valuable and when they are motivated to participate. Objectives and goals, if helpful, should be set by the members and should remain fluid, with the focus on group learning rather than simply the fulfilment of tasks.

Controlling COP can often stifle and kill them off. What they need is a flexible support structure and resources. This includes dedicated time, a place to meet, and technology support. It is important to help them move their ideas into wider practice and to give them feedback and challenges that might be stimulating. In our case the change agencies take in important role in this flexible support structure.





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The following conditions are found to be decisive for kickstarting learning and cocreation through COP:

First, a common concern and frame of reference should be established. This facilitates connectivity and ensures that the COP members understand each other. Knowing that everybody is here for the same reasons and using the same terms for the same concepts is vital for accomplishing innovative solutions towards complex challenges. In this respect, it is seen helpful that COP members can meet each other, and to use tools that facilitate co-creation and creativity.

Furthermore, establishing multi-layered relationships is important. This means that the COP membership should avoid silos and instead be determined by openness and diversity. This includes that COP members come from different contexts and backgrounds (for example from education, business, or public authorities) but also represent different occupational layers (for example from director and management to professionals on the job). It allows to provide knowledge between members from different angles but also for switching in roles between members which creates interdependence in the relation. This will result in more reciprocal interaction and greater trust in future relationships.

In addition, the place determines a major factor for successfully kickstarting a learning and co-creation spirit. If there are no specific makerspace environments available, it is important to allow for variety in the meeting place and the running and interaction style of the meetings.

HOW DO COP DIFFER FROM OTHER FORMS OF COLLABORATION?

There is no one concept of structuring and running COP. Single COP can therefore look very different. But what defines a group as a community of practice is not what it looks like from the outside but by how it is run and by what it does, with the emphasis on learning and co-creation for innovative solutions in practice.

COP are distinct from other types of groups, such as project teams, working groups and social networks in that they are somewhat self-selecting (at least over time), often voluntary (or participation is self-driven) and have fluid goals around learning (in the scope of the common concern and the self-set principles) rather than being pre-determined management objectives.

COP are characterised by mutual learning, shared rich practice, and joint exploration of innovative ideas. Many structural aspects are not pre-set or follow a plan, but they emerge from the action of the COP.





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COP distinguish from think tanks as they take on and spread new knowledge but with a clear focus on implementation in practice, rather than just theory. And they embrace an ongoing cycle of learning and doing through multiple smaller scale initiatives emerging from the overall COP activities.

Because COP are often self-initiated or emerge from existing relationships, they are characterised by a strong community spirit and/or they create trusted relationships. At their best, this leads to the fact that they become somewhat even self-incentivising.

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