An Overview of Communities of Practice (CoP)
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What is a Community of Practice?
- It is a community of learning that facilitates aggregation of knowledge that may be widely dispersed among different stakeholders.
- The community is generally described as a group of people connected by common interest or objective who define their identities by the roles they play and the relationships they share in the group’s activity.
- The learning community itself can take many forms and organize around a specific policy or learning objective, professional development goal, etc.

Lave and Wenger (1991), Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Cambridge University Press. [This is a small book].

How does the NCAI Policy Research Center use the Community of Practice Approach?
- We bring together Indian Country’s core stakeholders to build a collective, tribally-driven research and policy agenda.
- We currently operate Communities of Practice on the following topics:
  - Indian Child Welfare
  - Climate Change
  - Tribal Governance
  - Community-Researcher Partnerships

What are the benefits of this approach to research?
- Focusing resources
  - Building a collective agenda helps identify priorities. These priorities allow funders, researchers, and policymakers to focus their resources on projects that meet community needs and have the greatest potential impact.
- Keeping research meaningful to communities
  - It ensures that the research agenda is in sync with a community’s policy agenda.
- Honoring different kinds of knowledge
  - One of the primary objectives in building a CoP is to build a large, diverse group of stakeholders who can share information and resources with one another. This results in a pool of many kinds of knowledge and experience that participants can draw on.
- Providing a long-term resource for stakeholders
  - CoPs maintain support for communities beyond a single a research project or policy objective.
- Supporting a diverse, practical, and useful information products
  - CoPs can offer a variety of resources to their participants throughout the life of projects: teleconferences, presentations, meeting notes, handouts, a forum for asking questions and gathering information, etc.
- Facilitating stronger capacity for all the stakeholders (individuals and organizations) involved
  - Access to networks, information, learning opportunities, and other resources.
Additional Resources

- **Etienne Wenger** (the primary scholar behind CoP theory and application) maintains a very useful website on Communities of Practice. You can find his introduction to CoPs here: [http://www.ewenger.com/theory/](http://www.ewenger.com/theory/)


- **Evolution of Wenger’s Concept of Community of Practice.** Li et. al. (2009). [http://tinyurl.com/ybhx9ro](http://tinyurl.com/ybhx9ro)

- **NCAI PRC Indian Child Welfare CoP website** (sign-up to view resources) [http://childwelfare.ncaiprc.org](http://childwelfare.ncaiprc.org)

For any additional information on the NCAI PRC CoP program, please contact Erik Stegman at estegman@ncai.org.