



## **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:
  - o Indian Child Welfare
  - o Climate Change
  - o Tribal Governance
  - o Community-Researcher Partnerships

### **What are the benefits of this approach to research?**

- Focusing resources
  - o 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
  - o It ensures that the research agenda is in sync with a community's policy agenda.
- Honoring different kinds of knowledge
  - o 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
  - o CoPs maintain support for communities beyond a single a research project or policy objective.
- Supporting a diverse, practical, and useful information products
  - o 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
  - o 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/>
- **Communities of Practice: Learning as a Social System.** Etienne Wenger (1998). <http://tinyurl.com/ybsm2qv>
- **Communities of Practice: The Social Fabric of a Learning Organization.** Etienne Wenger (1996). <http://tinyurl.com/ydml165>
- **Evolution of Wenger's Concept of Community of Practice.** Li et. al. (2009). <http://tinyurl.com/ybhx9ro>
- **NCAI PRC Indian Child Welfare CoP website** (sign-up to view resources) <http://childwelfare.ncaiprc.org>

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