Communities that Practice What They Preach

*NLII VCOP Pilots Tackle Conceptual Frameworks, Definition of Principles, and Practices*
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“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion for a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”

—Étienne Wenger, 2002

“Virtual communities of practice are communities of practice (and the social ‘places’ that they collectively create) that rely primarily (though not necessarily exclusively) on networked communication media to communicate, connect, and carry out community activities.”

—Vicki Suter, 2003

There are a number of reasons the NLII has made virtual communities of practice a key theme. First, they offer an environment for professional development of faculty and staff. Second, they leverage face-to-face experiences as much as possible and then extend effective connection and communication after meetings or conferences have taken place. They harness technology to create environments in which learners—whether students, faculty, staff or EDUCAUSE/NLII members—can construct and share knowledge when face-to-face experiences are too expensive or not possible. They form the basis for an effective knowledge-management strategy and provide tools that encourage and facilitate member collaboration on task forces and working groups—or virtual teams—and then harvest the knowledge the teams create. Finally, in the NLII’s Framework for Action model, communities of practice are the milieus in which agents for change need to operate, and they provide an environment for the development and refinement of shared conceptual frameworks at the institutional, system, and professional levels; for the definition of principles; and for identification of effective practices.
As part of the EDUCAUSE Virtual Communities of Practice (VCOPs) Initiative (http://www.educause.edu/vcop/), the NLII has set up four pilot communities to operate from October 2002 through January 2004 for the following purposes:

- To test community-building tools and support infrastructures
- To provide new and more-flexible mechanisms that are time and place independent for information sharing and collaboration
- To integrate content and communication resources in a professional development learning environment
- To test VCOPs as knowledge generation and management strategy

The four communities are organized around four topics:

- Electronic Portfolios (E-PAC)
- Learning Objects (LOVCOP)
- New Academy
- Teaching and Learning

The communities are facilitated by facilitator teams of two or three facilitators per VCOP who are supported by two NLII staff members: Darren Cambridge and Vicki Suter. Multiple venues are used, including a community platform (Worktools), chats, videoconferences, audioconferences, Web tours, listservs, and face-to-face meetings. Each community has had at least one face-to-face meeting at a regularly scheduled event such as the NLII Annual Meeting for all communities, the Fall 2002 Focus Session for the E-PAC (http://www.educause.edu/nlii/meetings/nlii023/), and the Summer 2003 Focus Session (http://www.educause.edu/nlii/meetings/nlii033/) for some members of the New Academy. To date, total membership in the four VCOP pilot communities exceeds 400. A preliminary report dated July 2003 has been developed that contains preliminary findings and recommendations concerning resources, community technologies, and success factors. Several of the pilot communities have been involved in the planning and delivery of NLII focus sessions. For the annual meeting featured session on EDUCAUSE’s Virtual Communities of Practice (VCOPs) Initiative, see http://www.educause.edu/asp/doclib/abstract.asp?ID=NLI0334.
In addition to the NLII VCOPs and MERLOT (http://www.merlot.org/Home.po), the NLII 2003 Annual Meeting featured several other VCOPs: a set of closely related communities at the University of Minnesota (http://www.umn.edu/) and a California State University systemwide community of academic technology staff.

Linda Jorn, director of the Digital Media Center (http://dmc.umn.edu/), and J. D. Walker, instructional technology consultant—both of them from the Office of Information Technology at the University of Minnesota (http://www1.umn.edu/oit/)—have done considerable work on both the theory and the practice of virtual communities in their attempt to identify types of workplace virtual communities, understand their properties, identify management and evaluation issues, and use their expertise as learning technologists to help faculty design such communities. The key question they’ve tackled is, What are the design, management, and evaluation issues associated with creating a virtual community?

The WebCT Support Community evolved out of two smaller virtual teams, both of which continue to exist in related community space: the Digital Media Center virtual team and the WebCT administrative team. It now includes faculty using WebCT (http://www.webct.com/) and departmental college support staff, and it supports 1,500 University of Minnesota faculty per term as well as about 30,000 students per term in their use of WebCT. The community uses multiple channels of communication with different levels of formality for each.

One case study—the Online Learning Communities Seminar—used as its guiding principle that a subject is best taught by modeling it in the teaching process and that participants learn by experience. Participant experience varied from those who’d never worked virtually with someone before meeting the person face-to-face to those who prefer virtual communities for some type of activities and face-to-face for others, to those who valued the speed of access to others and to information across a geographically dispersed campus, to those in, say, global teams that are carrying out activities that simply cannot be done with others without the virtual environment. The Online Learning
Communities Seminar used different modes of online communication and one face-to-face meeting. It was designed to model good and bad Netiquette and its effects, how to set tone and atmosphere, and how to project identity, different kinds of structure, and facilitation of online discussion. For more information—including a handout on helpful definitions and community characteristics, another on the characteristics of Internet tools as spaces for workplace virtual communities, and a listing of resources, all developed by the University of Minnesota presenters—see http://www.educause.edu/asp/doclib/abstract.asp?ID=NLI0326.

Louis Zweier, director of the Center for Distributed Learning at California State University’s Office of the Chancellor, described CATS (the Community of Academic Technology Staff), as a solution to a professional development problem: information technology staff work in a fast-changing environment and are charged with meeting diverse needs, yet most professional development opportunities are extended to faculty. CATS offers an opportunity for staff within the California State system to build community, to cultivate relationships and exchange information, and to realize they’re not alone and don’t have to reinvent the wheel. CATS is a collaborative community with the primary goal of supporting its members—both individually and collectively—in increasing their knowledge, productivity, and professional effectiveness in service of California State University’s academic technology goals.

CATS provides programs, communication and technological infrastructures, resources and tools, and strategic opportunities so that its members can collaborate and contribute to each other’s objectives. In addition, it operates in both the virtual and face-to-face realms, with an annual conference that four staff members from each campus attend; statewide, regional, and local events; monthly online seminars that get archived for later viewing; e-mail lists; and an online community environment in MERLOT for sharing resources.

In addition, a grant program called Technology Integration Grants for Educational Resource Sharing (TIGERS) is situated in CATS. The purpose of TIGERS
(http://cats.cdl.edu/docs/tigers_2k2.pdf) is to improve learning and teaching, support staff productivity, promote resource sharing, and build community among staff. The program provides funding for staff projects that document methods or create tools. Such projects must produce a sharable product, address a significant need among staff, involve collaboration with staff from other campuses, have project oversight coordinated with the Center for Distributed Learning, and be reported on at the next CATS conference. Example projects include online Americans with Disabilities and instructional management systems workshops and a collaborative interface design evaluation and testing service, whereby staff submit interfaces to be evaluated and the system asks other staff with expertise in the area to evaluate it across 12 dimensions.

For more information about CATS, see http://www.cdl.edu/cats/; for the annual meeting presentation, see http://www.educause.edu/asp/doclib/abstract.asp?ID=NLI0333.

### NLII Activities Planned

The NLII plans to continue the VCOP pilots through January 2004 and to deliver a final report on them at the NLII 2004 Annual Meeting. In addition, the NLII maintains a key themes page with information on virtual communities of practice and related resources at http://www.educause.edu/nlii/keythemes/VirtualCommunities.asp.