

Learning and Organisational Resources for Communities of Practice

Type of resource: Choosing and (individually and collectively) appropriating tools, supporting CoPs in conceiving scenarios of tools uses

Type of scenario: Reification

ScenariosUses: Suggesting scenarios of uses for reification of practices-knowledge

Summary

Of all the problems that can plague a CoP, volatile knowledge and lack of efficient communication between CoP members are two of the most sensitive subjects. Fortunately, with a few good reification habits, these issues can be solved with a great efficiency.

Objectives

Help a CoP to solve the issue of the lack of communication between CoP members through discussions (face-to-face or at a distance) and promote the sharing of personal experience about their roles in the CoP. Both of these activities will lead to reification, a simple practice that is often overlooked.

Scenario

1. A member of a CoP identifies four essential data:
 - the CoP spatial dispersion (are its members geographically sparse or do they all live next door? – and all possible variations);
 - the CoP size;
 - the subject matters that are common to all CoP members but are kept in oral tradition or in internal documents;
 - the frequency of real life meetings, if any.
2. Using either a collaborative tool or during a plenary meeting (what is possible depends on the CoP spatial dispersion and size), the CoP member enrolls a group of volunteers (his 'task force') with whom he works on the basis of his initial data. They refine it a bit and, for each identified subject matter, a 'head of task' is designed, depending of the volunteers' personal preferences and competencies.
3. Depending on the size of the CoP and subject matters, one same member can be the head of multiple tasks. The reverse works too: if a subject matter is particularly huge, more than one member can become head of the task.
4. Each 'head of task' writes one (or a few) articles – even incomplete – in a collaborative tool, like SweetWiki or Google Docs. These documents are pertinent to their subject matter and their goal is to be the 'building blocks' of a larger task.
5. (In some cases – e.g. very big, motivated CoPs –, this step will occur at the same time as the fourth point.) All the CoP members are invited to come and enrich the initial corpus.

6. At a regular periodicity, events are organized, from plenary meetings to simple newsletters (and, in between, face-to-face meetings of subgroups of the CoP, discussions through mailing-lists, etc.). The goal of these events is to keep the CoP members aware and motivated and not to fall in some kind of soft apathy.

Tools to support activity

- SweetWiki (<http://argentera.inria.fr:8080/> - <http://palette.ercim.org/content/view/160/119/>): by allowing a CoP to edit a same corpus of knowledge without needing physical meeting and with very little formal hindrance, the Semantic Wiki system that is offered by SweetWiki can help reification of practice and knowledge. Being a collaborative tool, it allows CoP members to reify their collective knowledge in a centralized, well-organized corpus. The tags/folksonomy system helps people finding the knowledge they search.

Example of use by a community of practice

A previously non-formal group of nurse-teachers who were reunited under the name TFT (transition from training to work), has decided to have regular plenary meetings, with usually a precise topic at the agenda. The topic is brainstormed during the meeting and its minutes are written on the CoP SweetWiki by a member of the CoP (first reification level). In the next day, the subjects that were talked about during the brainstorm are expanded by CoPs members, who were present or not at the meeting (second reification level).

<http://argentera.inria.fr/swikitft/data/Main/CompteRendu.jsp> - an example of TFT minutes
