

Early sketch of CoP diagram: synchronic view

## THE SANDBOX BLOG

### Communities of Practice: Using systems thinking to co-create a better world

Scott Francisco — March 26, 2016

Recently, Pilot Projects has been both creating and researching 'Communities of Practice' as an approach to solving complex or 'wicked' problems. A community of practice is a group of practitioners, researchers, and thought-leaders drawn together from different disciplines into a common 'space' (often a physical one) by the shared goal of improving results in a particular field or 'domain.' Members are typically energetic people with big goals who have been frustrated by the lack of progress in their domain caused by insular and siloed disciplines: i.e., people not working—or not working well—together because they lack the vocabulary, skills, motivation, or space to do so.

My interest in communities of practice started with a question: *How can we connect architects, designers, and city planners who believe (for a variety of reasons) that wood is the best material to build our homes and cities, with communities who harvest it sustainably and scientists who study how to do this best?* Inherently interdisciplinary, this question spurred Pilot Projects and several other partner organizations to create our own, new community of practice called **Wood at Work**. After our initial conference in the fall of 2015 and several follow-up meetings, we have more than a hundred energetic leaders from industry, forestry, conservation, architecture, engineering, city planning, and policy-making working together.



The Wood at Work community of practice was started with a series of events that drew diverse participants together

But that's just the beginning. Interdisciplinary collaborations are often promoted, but in practice are difficult to manifest and sustain. Realizing that more groups like this are sorely needed to solve the complex issues we face today, we started academic research in collaboration with the **University of Michigan** on what makes a community of practice work: engaging people over time, creating a sense of shared identity, and ultimately transforming its members and the field (see below). I've come to appreciate how much intentionality, planning, and skill goes into sustaining this kind of collaboration—and the power of the results when it is done well.

The paper that I am honored to be currently co-authoring with U of M IFRI researchers **Cristy Watkins**, **Jennifer Zavaleta**, and **Sarah Jane Wilson**, takes a broad view of communities of practice, and then looks at

**Read the paper Scott co-authored, published in *Conservation Biology*:**  
"Developing an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral community of practice in the domain of forests and livelihoods"

**Listen to Scott discuss communities of practice in this *Creativity Labs* podcast with Ken Kinard of Accent Interactive and Mike Boyes of Credo Consulting.**

"It was an extraordinary conference. I learnt so much."

—Kenneth Frampton, renowned architecture historian and Ware Professor of Architecture, Columbia University, on the 2015 Wood at Work conference

"Wood at Work is a compelling force for moving the mass timber building discussion forward. ... The conference really hit the spot by showing a significant and appropriate amount of care for the state of the world's ecology—the personal, scientific and heartfelt side—before moving into the practical business of wood, which it also did quite well."

—Jeff Spiritos, Spiritos Properties

"The Wood at Work conference was very diverse, and different from many I go to. It was absolutely great!"

—Doug Boucher, Director, Tropical Forests

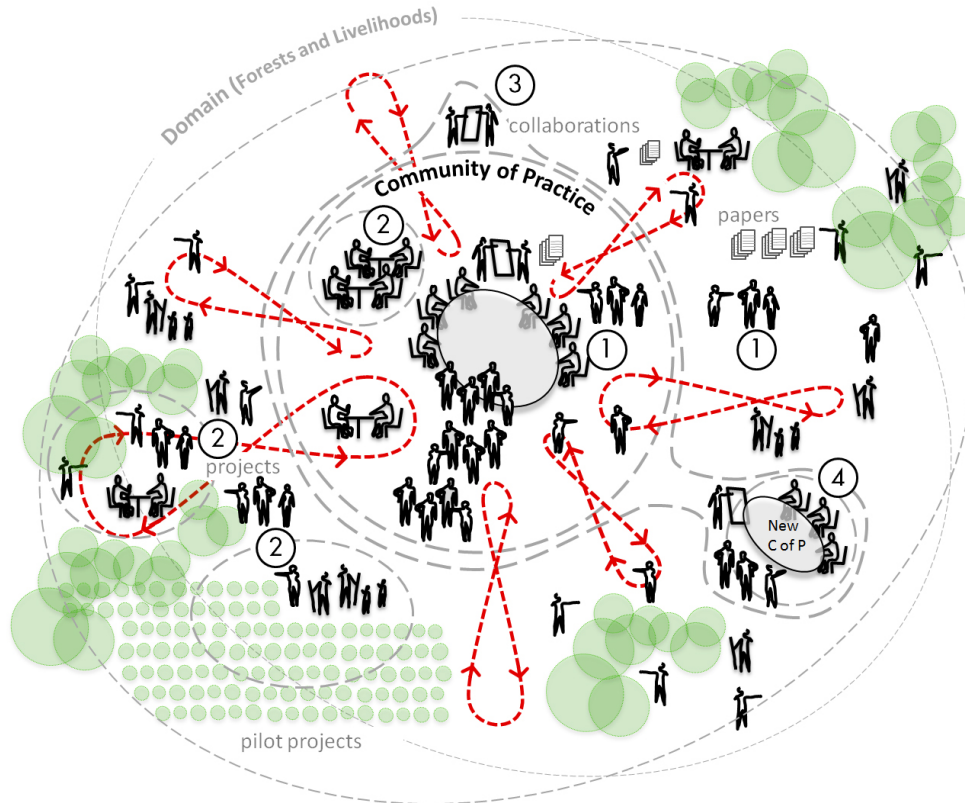
how they could be useful in the domain of 'forests and livelihoods'—the study and practice of people living interdependently with the world's forests and our increasingly globalized world. Not too complex, right? It only involves economics, health, education, biodiversity, culture, industry, growth, demographics, governance, and leadership, all both locally and internationally. And all of these areas must be thought of 'at once,' not in isolation.

How can we do this? That's where the community of practice comes in. It is about co-creating ideas and solutions that would never come about without active participation of people from many points of view, wisdom, field experience, and studied expertise. It also involves 'systems thinking,' an approach to solving problems holistically and 'in context' that is often lost in our current obsession with specialized data and expertise. A community of practice, as a system, is a fundamental example of "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" - often exponentially so! You will be able to read more about our systems thinking perspective when our paper is published, later this year. [\[Here it is!\]](#)

& Climate Initiative, Union of Concerned Scientists

"Great conference! I learned a heck of a lot to say the least."  
—Joshua Tosteson, Sen. Vice President, Programs, Planning, and Assessment, Rainforest Alliance

"I had a great time at Wood at Work, learned a lot, and met some very interesting people."  
—Duke Claghorn, Business Development Manager at Langan Engineering & Environmental Services



**Community of practice as a socio-cultural system: the 'synchronic view.'** Diagram by Scott Francisco from *Conservation Biology Communities of Practice* paper illustrating the all-important participant movements in and out of the community of practice; strengthening individuals' performance in respective fields, while simultaneously and synergistically strengthening the community.

As a designer and practicing cultural theorist, my *raison d'être* has always been to co-create solutions to complex challenges in systems and cities. Building on our track record of success with well-designed participatory processes (see our signature [Sandbox](#) service), and our commitment to systems thinking for design and leadership, [Pilot Projects](#) is now offering services to help our network of collaborators and clients develop communities of practice of their own.

This is a logical addition to [Pilot Projects'](#) repertoire. After seven years of bringing people from very different professions, positions, and perspectives around the table—literally—to co-create sustainable futures, we are realizing that we are already in the business of designing and sustaining communities of practice. But it's wonderful how good theory, added to experience, can boost both performance and enjoyment. We hope these ideas will help you in your own endeavors and organizations, and further our shared mission to co-create a better world!

[Want to know more?](#)

## COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

A 'Community of Practice' is a form of strategic knowledge management where information, skills, and experience are shared between diverse participants within a group to improve professional outcomes. The community of practice concept brings a layer of intentionality and clarity to the long history of cross-disciplinary work environments exemplified in labs, guilds, and professional and cultural organizations, such as MIT's Building 20 where "accidental" cross-disciplinary collisions led to the invention of RADAR; Edison's "Invention Factory" at Menlo Park where the phonograph and lightbulb were created; and Andy Warhol's "Factory" where artists congregated to create art forms, publications, and cultural icons in New York City. Each brought together diverse groups who shared a common "domain" and ambition to learn from each other and produce more meaningful work.

## SYSTEMS THINKING

Systems thinking is a method of inquiry dedicated to understanding the complex interdependencies between

components, contexts, and outcomes. A system is defined as a set of things organized and interconnected in a pattern or structure that produces a characteristic set of behaviors, often classified as its function or purpose, within a particular context (Donella Meadows). A system is not the sum of the behavior or performance of its parts, but rather “a product of their interactions” (Russell Ackoff). The holistic reality of a system is easily lost during analysis, which, by breaking a system down into individual components, can unintentionally diminish the importance of the less visible and tangible relationships and interconnections, both internal and contextual. A systems approach can be used to better understand how a community of practice functions, and help leaders design a community of practice with a structure and purpose that aligns with their vision—i.e., it organizes parts, people, intentions, and practices into entities with emergent properties that get the job done.

#### IFRI

The International Forestry Resources and Institutions is a longstanding global network of researchers and practitioners headquartered at the University of Michigan who study the relationships between forests and people in geographies around the world.

#### FLARE

Forests and Livelihoods: Assessment, Research, and Engagement is a community of practice initiated by the IFRI team. It seeks to bring researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers together to create new solutions in the domain of forests and livelihoods.

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