Train the trainers or let the trainers train themselves ?

The case of a community readiness assessment for ICT for development trainers

This brief describes a community readiness assessment process with the aim of sharing experiences from a methodological point of view. Everywhere in the world adults are being trained on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). What can a trainer in Nepal learn from a trainer in Zambia? Are they interested in sharing ideas and helping each other while on other sides of the globe? And what can a development organisation do to foster such learning processes?

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What is a Community of Practice?
Communities of Practice (CoPs) are groups of people who are informally bound together by a shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise. Some communities of practice are informal, some are recognised or formalised by their organisations. (Wenger and Snyder, 2000) A community of practice is defined by three dimensions:

- Domain - the field of knowledge and inquiry as understood and continually renegotiated by its members.
- Community - a group of people interacting regularly, with a sense of belonging.
- Practice - the body of knowledge, methods, routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary and styles that members have developed over time. A shared practice is a way of doing and approaching things that are shared to a significant extent among members. (Wenger, 1998)

Though the concept was first embraced by business enterprises as part of the second wave of knowledge management initiatives - organisations trying to manage knowledge as a strategic asset (Wenger, 2005) - there is currently a huge interest amongst development organisations to apply this theory to capacity building in the south.

Why assess the readiness of ICT4D trainers to engage in a community of practice?
The International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD)

Box 1: IICD's Capacity Development Programme

The International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) specialises in information and communication technologies (ICT) as a tool for development. IICD's programme partners often need specific capacities in order to make the activity – a project, programme or policy – a success because Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) is a pioneering field. Capacity development entails the strengthening of individual, organisational and institutional competencies of IICD's partners. The abilities of ICT and media training institutions are strengthened so they, in turn, can address the capacity needs of policy and project partners. Training is generally delivered in one of six formats:

1. Technical and sector seminars
2. Project formulation and prototyping workshops
3. Technology based training
4. Job-related training
5. Train-the-Trainer workshops
6. ICT-expertise development

currently organises various training workshops and offers a web space with a shared platform for disseminating resources

for ICT4D trainers (www.itrainonline.org).

IICD has ventured into a community readiness assessment because it envisaged how a vibrant community of practice could reinforce the impact of the Capacity Development Programme. The assumption is that these capacity development activities will become more embedded in a continuous long term learning process of ICT4D trainers through a community of practice.

Training Trainers

The community readiness assessment method

IICD had the following initial question:

Could a Community of Practice (CoP) help address the ICT4D-trainers' need for continuous, easily accessible, and context-appropriate support? If yes, how should the evolution of a Community of Trainers (CoT) be supported by the involved actors?

In the assessment, that stretched over a period of four months, a team of four people was closely involved: one IICD capacity development officer, an intern from the University of Utrecht - faculty of new media and digital culture, and two external consultants - one specialised in communities of practice, the other in learning for development. The intern and IICD officer were located at IICD's office in the Netherlands; the consultants were located in the Netherlands and the USA respectively, forcing the team to practice e-collaboration itself.

The readiness assessment methods were an online survey and an online group discussion. An online survey was developed by the team and administered in SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool, next it was tested in Zambia. Seventy-two affiliated trainers were specifically invited by e-mail to complete the survey, and in addition the survey was made public on the itrainonline website. The main topics of the assessment were (covering domain, community and practice):

1. Work profile
2. Knowledge areas
3. Group identity in terms of expertise

4. Current use of (online) technologies and languages
5. Existing networks/informal networks
6. Interest in a community of practice and to play certain roles in the community

All in all 65 trainers responded. The survey was followed by a four-week online focus group discussion using Dgroups, an email-based discussion platform, with the aim to deepen and enliven the findings of the survey. Twenty respondents enthusiastically joined the online discussion, to converse the survey results and additional questions in a pace fed by the facilitators in a rhythm of one post every 3-4 days. The survey continued online and in total more than 100 trainers have responded. During the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) 2005 conference all itrainonline website partner organisations met and as a group decided to try and nurture the Community of Trainers on the basis of the community readiness results.

How ready are the trainers?

The assessment shows, that ICT4D training is executed in varied environments through trainers with varied contextual backgrounds. The trainers work in many different countries (53% in Africa, 26% in Asia, 5% in Latin America, but also 11% in North America and 5% in Europe) and for many different organisations: 34% worked for government organisations, 31% for NGOs (non-governmental organisations), 12% for private enterprises and 15% fully self-employed. They are already affiliated with different networks. This variety could imply that the proposed CoP will not emerge naturally, as trainers may not be able to easily arrange ways to reach out to each other or may not be aware of the existence of other trainers with similar needs and practice issues.

At the same time, there were clearly shared interests and challenges, for example 30% of the respondents was interested in appropriate training materials, resolving hard- and software issues, and wanted to learn more about how to train specific audiences (e.g. 'the know-it-all' audiences).

There was a strong willingness to share knowledge, experiences and expertise with others. This group of trainers seems to be aware of their learning needs and the potential benefits of sharing with peers to improve their work. Furthermore, this is a group with good access and experience to work online. The majority had full access to the internet via their own computer at work - 41% uses the computer more than 40 hours per week and just 6% less than 5 hours (we

Box 2: Possible roles that can be distinguished in a community of practice (CoP)	
Experts	are the keepers of the practice and serve as centres of specialised tacit knowledge for the CoP and its members.
Core members	usually emerge from the experts. Often they are looked upon for guidance and leadership before or after a leader emerges or is selected.
Community members	take ownership in the CoP by participating in its events and activities.
Leaders	provide the overall guidance and management needed to build and maintain the CoP, its relevance and strategic importance, and its level of visibility.
Facilitators/ moderators	are responsible for networking and connecting CoP members who need to share or require knowledge. They encourage and energise participation by interacting with the CoP, by endorsing ideas, and by directing knowledge to the appropriate experts.
Content managers	are the ultimate sources of explicit knowledge. They search, retrieve, transfer and respond to direct requests for the CoP's explicit knowledge and content.
Mentors	are CoP members who help new members navigate the CoP and adopt its norms and practices.
Admin/Events Coordinators	coordinate and plan online or face-to-face CoP events or activities.
Technologists	oversee and maintain CoP technology and help members navigate its terrain. By working with IT staff to ensure quality, performance, and reliability, the technologist ensures smooth operation of the CoP's collaborative technology.
Sponsors	(generally not part of the CoP) are senior managers who recognise the strategic importance of the CoP's practice and its contribution to the overall objectives. They help secure needed resources, nurture and protect the CoP, and insure its exposure.

are aware that this result is biased by the means of contacting them; email and a web-based survey). In addition they were familiar with the medium of online discussion groups; 98% participates in Yahoo or Dgroups discussion forums and 94% had a habit of looking for resources on the internet (although 28% had never visited itrainonline).

Recommendations for Communities of Practice in a development context
The following recommendations resulted from the readiness assessment process and apply to the situation of the community of ICT4D trainers. However, some of the recommendations could apply equally to other global communities of practice in a development context.

- Technologies supporting distributed communities of practice are rapidly developing, and the ICT4D trainers' community may make use of a wide range of technologies. Yet, starting with using the tools that are available and that people are familiar with is the most appropriate.
- A vibrant CoP may be able to connect local expertise and isolated professionals, and may develop a common language and practice standards. It can help spread best practices, produce innovative materials and develop professional competences as well as strategic thinking on the field of ICT4D capacity building.
- Pay attention to existing networks and links, internationally and locally, as people indicated that there are a large number of these professional networks already.
- A global community of practice would have to be organised according to the main language areas: English, French, Spanish, etc. Brokering among the communities to identify multilingual practitioners is best started roughly at the same time as designing for the CoP.
- Developing of a clear sense of local control and focus on the side of actual practice is extremely important and will depend on the legitimacy of community members who take on the leadership role. Development of such capacities requires culturally sensitive facilitation.
- If interactions can be supported with face-to-face contacts, development will be more rapid. Judicious use of travel funds may be extremely helpful.
- Just as the success of a community of practice depends on a certain amount of passion for its domain, supporting

communities requires a level of commitment and constancy because the community has to grow fairly organically. The timeframe which must be kept in mind is quite long, bearing in mind the diversity of trainers' practices involved.

- A significant role for IICD would be to incrementally develop measures of community performance; in the direction of the level of online discussion, quality and quantity of artefacts, community cohesiveness and anecdotal evidence about CoP members' changing practices, etc..
- The complexity of the assessment was well matched by working as a distributed team with overlapping and complementary expertise areas. The blending of fields of expertise led to a creative process and allowed for a good internal learning process on how to work in a distributed way using multiple means of communication. At the same time, this need for continuous interaction and communication between team members costs time and was underestimated at the conception stage.
- The focus group was an important part of the survey, which helped to make the findings more dynamic and to tease out some of the difficulties of nurturing such a community. For instance, it was hard for people to describe their context in an e-mail sufficiently for others to fully understand the remarks and questions. Furthermore, it was complicated to get an overview of all opinions through an online discussion and to ask questions about something which could emerge in the future, but which may not be fully grasped by the participants.
- Next time, a southern trainer could be part of the assessment team to represent someone immersed in practice. Even though this may require choosing a trainer with good access to

telephone and internet, this would provide some direct insights in the contextual practice questions of trainers. Furthermore, the person could have learned about communities of practice and co-creation in practice.

- As much as possible the readiness and start-up of the CoP should be a continuous process. In this case, ideas on how to continue were not developed because the question was whether to invest in a CoP or not; leading to a break in both time and persons involved in the readiness and start-up phase. Relationship building will have to recommence and it will be harder to link to some immediate practice questions from the online survey and focus group. For any future assessments, continuity can be ensured by making sure at least half of the team continues and by conceptualising the readiness assessment as the start-up phase of the CoP.

Even though communities of practice may seem like a hype or fad, the readiness assessment of the community of trainers shows that it might be a useful theory to catalyze learning processes in the context of development cooperation. At the same time, the effort, mindset and time-frame needed to facilitate and nurture communities of practice should not be underestimated.

References

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