Information Management Resource Kit

Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks

UNIT 1. ONLINE COMMUNITIES: A NEW OPPORTUNITY

LESSON 1. WHY YOU SHOULD USE THIS MODULE

NOTE

Please note that this PDF version does not have the interactive features offered through the IMARK courseware such as exercises with feedback, pop-ups, animations etc.

We recommend that you take the lesson using the interactive courseware environment, and use the PDF version for printing the lesson and to use as a reference after you have completed the course.

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- define online communities and networks;
- identity the benefits of using online communities and networks;
- recognize the importance of online communities as facilitators of knowledge and information exchange.

What is an online community

Traditionally, the communities that we worked in and that we learned from were principally confined to those that we could contact physically – i.e. people in our organization, town or geographic region.

A group of people (COMMUNITY)...

...who share common interests...

...using the Internet (ONLINE)

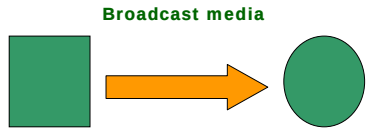
Recently, Information and Communication Technologies (**ICT**) have greatly increased the channels through which communities can function, to the point that some can exist "virtually" without any physical contact. The key factor in this change has been computer-mediated communication and information dissemination (e.g. e-mail, web).

These new communities are called **electronic (or online) communities.**

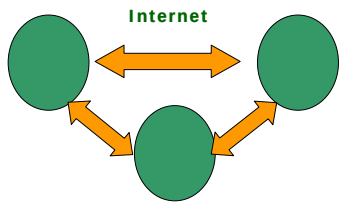
What is an online community

Online communities are made possible by a special characteristic of the Internet: the possibility of a **two-way flow of information**.

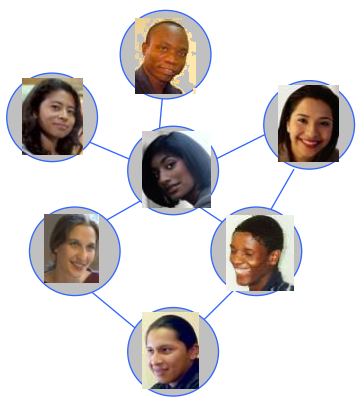
Broadcast media, such as television, are characterized by **one-way information flow**: from sender (active) to receivers (passive).



With e-mail based interactive tools, the **communication flows both ways**: each person can be a **sender** and a **receiver**.



What is an online community



There is a temptation to define an online community by the technology it uses. A community is not a tool! It is a group of people who may use a certain tool or tools to interact.

In other words, a mailing list is not a community, but an online community may communicate entirely via the mailing list.

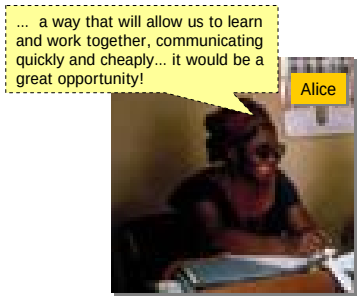
People define the community, the tools simply define how the community interacts.

Benefits of an online community

Communities offer us the power of **learning and working together**. We can impact our combined performance when we are driven by a shared purpose, when we act to put our ideas into practice, and when we enhance the connections we form with each other.

The two key points here are:

- **practice**, collaboration with others allows us to test our ideas, get feedback and interact in ways that we might not be able to do if we were working or learning alone; and
- **connections**, the relationships we make during this process not only help us, but also indirectly help those outside the immediate community as we become more effective.



Let's make Alice's acquaintance and see the reason why she thinks an online community would be a great opportunity ...

Benefits of an online community

*Alice is the Managing Director of the **Regional Association for Sustainable Agriculture (RASA)**.*

RASA's mission is to strengthen cooperation among its members through the dissemination and exchange of information, experiences and research results.

RASA's team has been publishing a newsletter for almost 10 years. They get many letters and increasing numbers of e-mail messages from readers, who are mainly staff members of agricultural research institutes and non-governmental organizations...

Characteristics of an online community

However, Alice knows that simple exchanges of e-mail between divisions of an organization don't constitute an online community! In fact, an online community is not merely a group of people who communicate online.

The concept of "Community" is affected by the nature and quality of relationships and communication, and relates to a shared vision and purpose.

In essence, an online community is a group of people who interact over time through electronic channels, and who are bound together by:

- **a shared interest or purpose**;

which is a cornerstone for

- **strengthened social relationships**.

Let's look at these last two characteristics in detail...

Shared interests

A shared interest or purpose is a community's "reason for existence".

The nature of this purpose may vary enormously: from culture, to health, education, business, hobbies...

People join a community for various reasons: for support, topical focus, professional development, information and ideas, learning and networking...

Community of Interest | **Community of Practice** | **E-learning Community**

Distributed Team | **Online events and Meetings**

Would you like to know more about Communities of practice?
See a mini-lesson on this topic in Annex 1.1.1

Shared interests

Community of Interest

Online communities are almost as diverse as their offline counterparts. What brings people together online might be as basic as a shared interest such as...

... football ...

The Liverpool Way

...or food ...

Slow Food

Shared interests

Community of Practice

What brings people together online might be a desire to improve a particular practice. In the field of agriculture, natural resource management, and rural development there are many such communities, for example...

...a forum on participatory use of geo-spatial information systems and technologies...

... Open Forum on Participatory Geographic Information Systems and Technologies ...

... or a group of specialists in sustainable rice production and marketing...

Sustainable rice workspace

Shared interests

E-learning Community

E-learning is the second fastest growing segment in online interaction (online events is the first). Educational institutions along with business and civic organizations are looking for "faster, better, cheaper" ways to help their constituents learn. So they are moving online.

Without editorializing on the "faster, better, cheaper" goals, here are some things to consider...

Applications include:
- Academic offerings/ "classes";
- Formal sequenced training; and
- As needed, or "just in time" training.

Key skills include:
- Subject matter expertise;
- Training expertise;
- Facilitation; and
- Cybrarianship, or linking people to relevant content and contacts.

The **Information Management Resource Kit (IMARK)** is an e-learning community. Its goal is to train individuals and support institutions and networks world-wide in the effective management of agricultural information.

http://www.imarkgroup.org/

Shared interests

Distributed Team

These are groups with a strong task, work orientation or subject focus, where priority may be given to a specific topic, timelines, task lists, commitments and process.

This can be aided by the use of static web pages to organize information, the combined use of linear and threaded conferencing spaces, and the regular use of summaries and reviews. Skills include traditional project management and organizing.

http://www.dgroups.org/groups/fao/WRB-Argicsoils/

An example of a distributed team is the discussion group of WRB (World Reference Base for Soil Resources) on Luvisols, Acrisols, Alisols and Lixisols.

Shared interests

Online events and Meetings

Online events, like offline events, can provide a focal point for an online migration, or regular punctuation for communities to stop, reflect, touch base or work intensively for a short period of time.

They can make a break from ongoing activities to connect and focus or, like a workshop, they can focus a group on tasks and deliverables within a fixed time frame.

An example of online events is the course on *High Performance Scientific Teams* organized by the CGIAR Gender and Diversity Program in fall 2002.

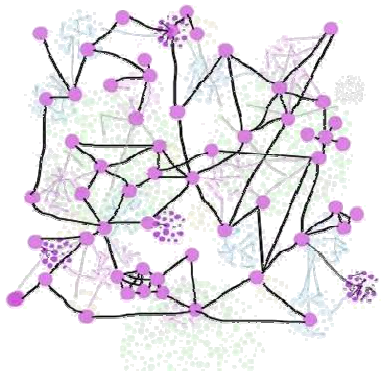
Shared interests

From the following examples, please state which ones might be considered an online community.

- A Brazilian group has created a web page with resources on preventing HIV/AIDS in youth and made it available on the Internet.
- A group of agricultural researchers spread across the globe use an e-mail list to share key research milestones, share data and help each other solve problems.
- Five policy makers from different countries working on rural education "meet" in an online chat room once a month to discuss current policy issues – their "virtual lunch" – to improve their practice as policy makers.
- An organization's manager decided he wanted his staff to share information so he subscribed them all to an e-mail list.

Please select the answers of your choice (2 or more) and press Check Answer.

Social networks



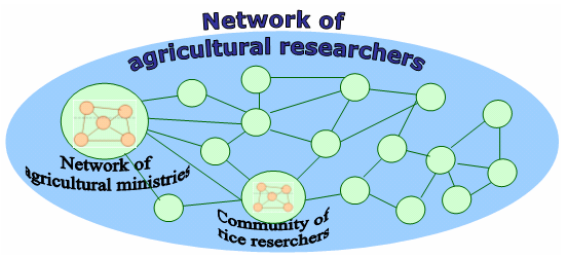
Communities concern people, and as such depend on social relationships. People with shared interests, professional or economic, are interconnected through loose social **"networks"**. Online communities exist within and between such networks.

Networks have boundaries that are not clearly defined (*fuzzy*), and there is often no central organizing structure to them. They often contain clusters or nodes where relationships are closer. Organizations or communities serve as those nodes.

Social networks

Why do Networks Matter to Communities?

Networks are like resource banks for communities.
Most communities, online and offline, exist within larger networks. These networks are very important as they offer a source of new members and ideas, as well as a place to send out new ideas from communities. They may help form relationships as well as spread the word about a community's work. For example, an online community of rice researchers may belong to a larger global network of agricultural researchers. It may share part of its membership with a network of agricultural ministries and extension workers.
When ideas need to be disseminated by the rice researchers, they can do this more quickly if they have nurtured connections to these larger networks. If new knowledge or information is needed, it can be sought through the networks.



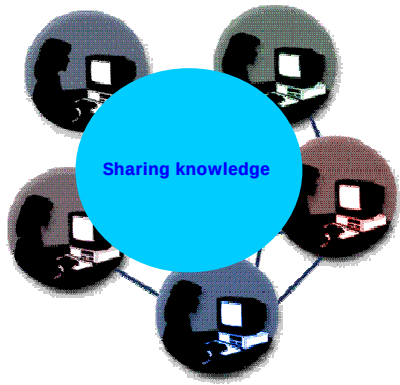
Metcalf's Law: the value of networks increases geometrically with the number of networks. In other words, the more connection points, the more valuable the network.

Sharing knowledge to achieve a purpose or goal

Online communities members have the capacity to **share** and **generate knowledge and information**:

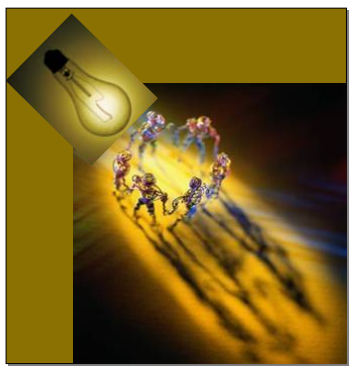
• often members' knowledge and information can be captured from the community's electronic communications and passed on over offline media;

• this "captured" knowledge and information is not always in useful forms, so one thing to consider in your community design is how to manage, extract and use these resources.



Sharing knowledge to achieve a purpose or goal

Online interaction represents a powerful tool for learning and knowledge sharing.



Think of communities of practice in the public, private, or informal sectors. Envision people working within or between organizations on projects such as the following:

• AIDS educators sharing ideas on how to reach target populations;

• IT managers working through problems around introducing new software; or

• agricultural researchers sharing data on field trials and implementation approaches.

These are learning communities which, although distributed, support specific goals such as preventing AIDS in rural communities or perfecting a new drought-resistant crop variety...

Sharing knowledge to achieve a purpose or goal

... Let's enlarge this thinking beyond the organizations to the wider communities they serve:

- rural communities may use online consultation to communicate with and inform the organizations who provide them with services, and so try to improve the quality of those services;
- rural communities could create online learning groups that recognize and strengthen community knowledge.

Online interaction can meaningfully contribute to these efforts. It can provide the means to connect people to **gather knowledge and experience** critical to organizational development, but more importantly, contribute towards achieving community and organizational goals.

Using this module

This module provides the strategic, interpersonal and technical skills needed in order to build and manage electronic communities and networks.

The course addresses:

1. people who are thinking of forming an online community;
2. members of online communities; and
3. coordinators and facilitators of online communities.

After completing the module, you will:

- understand the possibilities, opportunities and challenges of using ICTs to enhance existing methods of collaboration and information sharing; and
- be able to create and implement a plan to use electronic networking with other media to improve communication, information sharing and learning among communities and peer groups.

The module is designed as a self-paced course. **You can tailor your Personal Learning Path to your needs and interests.**

Using this module: a scenario

Do you remember Alice? Let's meet also her colleagues of the **Regional Association for Sustainable Agriculture** (**RASA**), Ibrahim, Chinwe and José...

RASA's mission is to **strengthen cooperation** among their members through the **dissemination and exchange of information**, **experiences** and **research results**. Alice and her colleagues have been publishing a newsletter for almost 10 years. They get many letters and increasing numbers of emails from readers, who are mainly staff members of agricultural research institutes and non-governmental organizations. They would like to involve their readers and regular contributors in an online community where everyone can share their knowledge more freely.

Using this module: a scenario

Alice, Ibrahim, Chinwe and José will each be completing part of the IMARK Module. But each of them has different needs and interests.

Alice is the **Managing Director** of the Association.

I'm open to the idea, but what are the costs and benefits? How do we define success? The Board of Directors meets next week and they have some questions about how this fits within our strategy. I'd like to see a more detailed plan before we proceed.

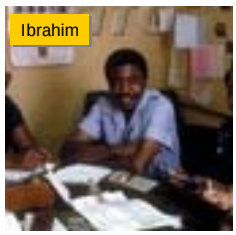
Alice needs:

✓ *An overview of benefits and opportunities offered by online communities (Unit 1)*
✓ *A general overview of the planning steps and timelines that can be expected (Unit 2)*

Alice's Personal Learning Path should focus on strategic issues and organizational requirements. She can skip parts of Units 3-5.

Using this module: a scenario

Alice, Ibrahim, Chinwe and José will each be completing part of the IMARK Module. But each of them has different needs and interests.



Ibrahim is the systems administrator and Web site manager. **He is the technical advisor on this project.**

Should we consider adding a discussion platform to our Web site? Who are the participants? What kind of Internet access do they have? Is Open Source an option? I might have to train users.

Ibrahim needs:

- ✓ *An overview of benefits and opportunities offered by online communities (Unit 1)*
- ✓ *Understanding of the environmental and organizational context (Unit 2)*
- ✓ *Complete knowledge of technical options (Unit 3)*
- ✓ *Complete knowledge of how to design an online community (Unit 4)*
- ✓ *A general understanding of the role of the facilitator (Unit 5)*

Ibrahim should cover all the units, but with a focus on units 2-4. He may be able to skip parts of units 1 and 5.

Using this module: a scenario

Alice, Ibrahim, Chinwe and José will each be completing part of the IMARK Module. But each of them has different needs and interests.

Chinwe is the head of the Outreach Programme and the **coordinator of this project**.

I need to build a team and get commitment from Management. We need to do a thorough needs analysis. I don't expect to be involved from day to day. Let's make sure we have a sound strategy in place, and that we have a system for **monitoring and evaluation** so we can learn from the experience. How should we promote the community?

Chinwe needs:

- ✓ *An overview of benefits and opportunities offered by online communities (Unit 1)*
- ✓ *In-depth understanding of the environmental and organizational context (Unit 2)*
- ✓ *Complete knowledge of technical options (Unit 3)*
- ✓ *General knowledge of how to design an online community (Unit 4)*
- ✓ *A general understanding of the role of the facilitator (Unit 5)*

Chinwe should complete all the units, but she does not need to acquire technical and facilitation skills in depth. She may be able to skip some Lesson steps in Units 4 and 5.

Using this module: a scenario

Alice, Ibrahim, Chinwe and José will each be completing part of the IMARK Module. But each of them has different needs and interests.

José is the editor of the newsletter. He will be the main facilitator of the new network.

"I'm a communicator, not a computer expert!" "Many of our readers don't have access to e-mail. How can we ensure that their views are represented?" "I plan to start off the debate with a look at some recent case studies of genetically modified organisms. People have such strong opinions on GMOs. How can I keep the tone of the discussion positive and constructive?"

José needs:

- ✓ *An overview of benefits and opportunities offered by online communities (Unit 1)*
- ✓ *In-depth understanding of the environmental and organizational context (Unit 2)*
- ✓ *General knowledge of technical options (Unit 3)*
- ✓ *General knowledge of how to design an online community (Unit 4)*
- ✓ *In-depth understanding of the role of the facilitator (Unit 5)*

José should complete all of Unit 5 and parts of the other Units.

What is covered and what is not

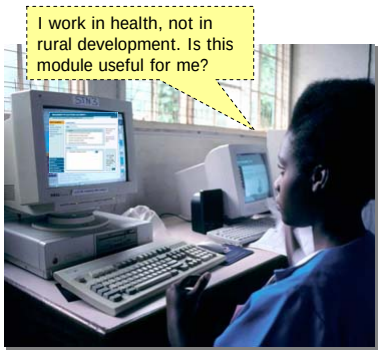
This course does not recommend or give advice on how to use specific hardware and software to support your community. The aim instead is to provide you with information you need for **strategic planning and decision-making**.

The course will guide you through the steps required make appropriate software and hardware choices, depending on your resources, capacities, and the needs of your audience.

The module includes information on:

- *how to assess the needs of your stakeholders and the institutional capacity of your organization to support different technologies:*
- *the range of technology choices available: and*
- *how to balance different needs and priorities in selecting technologies.*

What is covered and what is not



The module is mainly designed for people with a shared interest in agriculture, Natural Resource Management (NRM), and rural development.

But also people working in any other field of development (health, education, governance, etc.) can benefit from this course.

The primary target audience for the course are organizations working in **"resource poor" contexts**, where the latest hardware and software may not be available, affordable, or even appropriate to the users. Therefore the emphasis in this course is on low-cost, accessible solutions.

What is covered and what is not

This course doesn't explain how to use ICTs in general (see resources on next page). You will not find information on topics such as how to use a computer, or how to use e-mail and the Web. It is assumed that the learners have access to a computer, basic access to the Internet, and that they have a basic knowledge of how to use these tools.

The focus of the course is on the use of ICTs for electronic networks and communities. Other applications of ICTs in support of agriculture, NRM and rural development are not covered, such as the use of rural radio, or the design of agricultural information databases. Many of these subjects are dealt with in the other Modules in the IMARK series.

What is covered and what is not

Online resources on how to use ICTs

http://dir.yahoo.com/Computers_and_Internet/Technical_Guides_and_Support/

http://www.computerhope.com/

http://computer.howstuffworks.com/

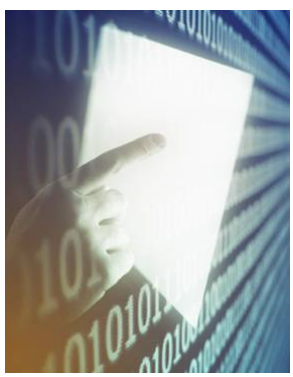
http://www.computerhelpatoz.com/how.html

http://www.cybertechhelp.com/

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_computer

http://www.computerbb.org/

What is covered and what is not



The emphasis of the course is on practice, not on theoretical issues in great depth.

One of the first principles of electronic networking is that it should be driven by the needs and interests of the people and organizations involved.

However, more in-depth readings on the technical issues raised are listed in the Online Resources and Additional Reading collections.

Summary

An online community is a group of people who interact over time and are bound together by a shared interest or purpose, which provides the cornerstone for social networks.

Online communities have the capacity to share and generate knowledge and information and offer the power of learning and working together.

Characteristics of this module:

- is mainly designed for coordinators, facilitators of online communities, and people who are thinking of forming an online community;
- provides the strategic, interpersonal and technical skills needed in order to build online communities;
- focuses on the needs of "resource poor" organizations and emphasizes simple, accessible, and low-cost technologies;
- is mainly designed for people with a shared interest in agriculture, NRM and rural development, but it will also be useful for people working in other development sectors such as health and governance; and
- is not technical - is about human networks, not computer networks.

If you want to know more...

Online resources

White, N. (1999, 2005) "How Some People Have Tried to Describe Community" at http://www.fullcirc.com/community/definingcommunity.htm

White, N (various) "Online Community Toolkit" at http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitymanual.htm

Smith, M. K. (2001) 'Community' in *the encyclopedia of informal education*, http://www.infed.org/community/community.htm.

Commonwealth of Learning, 2000. Introduction to Open and Distance Learning http://www.col.org/resources/startupguides/intro_learning.htm

Canadian Association for Community Learning/FuturEd, 2002. Consumer's Guide to e-Learning. http://www.col.org/newsrelease/ConGuide%20Eng%20CD.pdf

Yahoo! Directory: list of sites containing guides, tips and tricks, forums, tutorials, and other advice on computer and Internet. http://dir.yahoo.com/Computers_and_Internet/Technical_Guides_and_Support/

Computer Hope: collection of free services that allows users to access a database of extensive free computer related information. http://www.computerhope.com/

Howstuffworks "Computer Channel": how computers work inside and out. http://computer.howstuffworks.com/

Computer Help A to Z: free computer tips, ideas and articles to help you get more from your computer. http://www.computerhelpatoz.com/how.html

CyberTechHelp: help and technical support for all windows and macintosh operating systems, hardware, software, web design, and Internet issues. http://www.cybertechhelp.com/

If you want to know more...

Online resources

Personal computer from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_computer

Computerbb.org: computer help. http://www.computerbb.org/

Additional readings

Brown, John S., Duguid, Paul. 2002. The Social Life of Information. Published by Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA. ISBN 1-57851-708-7.

Kim, Amy Jo, Community Building on the Web : Secret Strategies for Successful Online Communities. 2002, PeachPit Press. San Francisco.

Powazek, Derek M., Design for Community, 2002, New Riders, Indianapolis, ISBN 0735710759.

Annex 1.1.1
Mini-lesson: Communities of Practice (CoPs)

Communities of practice are everywhere. We all belong to a number of them, at work, at school, at home, in our hobbies.

We are core members of some and we belong to others more peripherally (for example, you may be a member of a band, or you may just come to rehearsals to hang around with the group). Whatever form our participation takes, most of us are familiar with the experience of belonging to a community of practice.

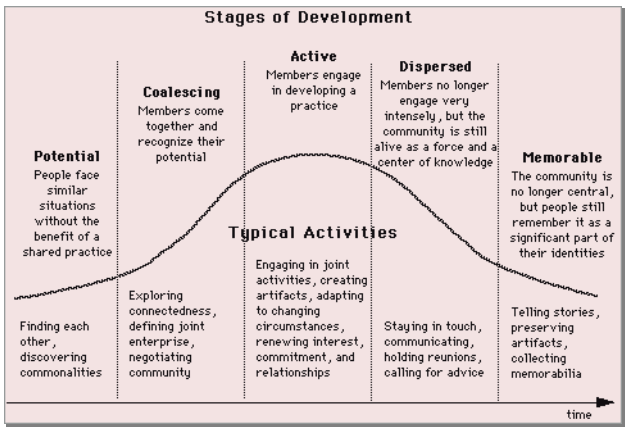
Members of a community are informally **bound by what they do together** and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities.

A community of practice is thus different from a community of interest or a geographical community, neither of which implies a shared practice.

A community of practice defines itself along three dimensions:

1. **What it is about**, its *joint enterprise* as understood and continually renegotiated by its members;
2. **How it functions**, mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity; and
3. **What capability it has produced**, the *shared repertoire* of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time.

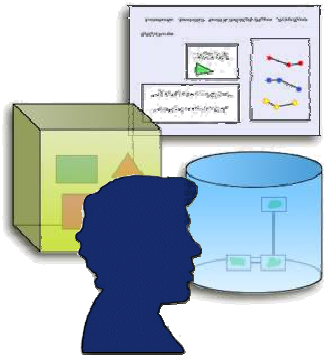
Communities of practice also move through various **stages of development** characterized by different **levels of interaction** among the members and different **kinds of activities**:



People belong to **communities of practice** - where they develop the **knowledge** that lets them do these other tasks - at the same time as they belong to other organizational structures, such as:

- **business units**, where they shape the **organization**;
- **teams**, where they take care of **projects**; and
- **networks**, where they form **relationships**.

This informal fabric of communities and shared practices makes the official organization effective and, indeed, possible.



Communities of practice are important to the functioning of any organization, but they become crucial to those that recognize **knowledge as a key asset**.

An effective organization is made of various interconnected communities of practice, each dealing with specific aspects of the organization's competencies.

Knowledge is created, shared, organized, revised, and passed on within and among these communities.

In a deep sense, these communities **"own" knowledge in practice**.