

# Become a (CoP) Story

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**Abstract—** Stories have a powerful impact on mind, body, and soul. During a training held in Bucharest, twenty-four participants from six countries learned the stages of creating and disseminating stories. At the end, they used their personal stories to create short-videos. The researcher argues that during their time together, the group created a community of practice (CoP) [1] and reified it through the end-products. The article will give examples of each CoP stage and evidence that the sharing of cultural differences, personal experiences, and interaction allowed for the participants to have an immersive social learning experience that culminated into powerful stories.

**Methods:** Using a narrative approach, the researcher will follow the CoP stages with the course journal and use the participants' reflections to underline mutual engagement.

**Keywords—** CoP, reification, personal stories, symbols.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Human minds are shaped by the stories heard since infancy to childhood and into adulthood: fairy tales, life stories, cautionary tales, work examples, videos, movies. All these are mere vehicle used to imprint previous experience into everyday life, thus becoming part of the arsenal of common culture and knowledge. This depository is culturally biased as it tends to be localised historically and geographically. With the proliferation of the internet and information technology, it extended beyond national borders, acquiring a global aspect.

Although the European Union is one entity, it holds many facets of culture and identity, as it is a melting pot for diverse cultures, nationalities, and languages. During the "Let's Digital Storytell" training held in Bucharest in July 2018, twenty-four participants from six countries (Romania, UK, Lithuania, Spain, Portugal, and Bulgaria), learned how to transform their own life stories into powerful videos to be shared with the world.

The researcher argues that during their time together, the group went through the different stages identified by Wenger to form a CoP [1]. The stories started as intimate, personal and, through multiple stages of cutting and refining, they were stripped to the crystalline kernel of human value that shined into a message meant for larger audiences. In this process of becoming, the participants shared their expertise and experiences, negotiating new meaning and gaining new cultural understanding. (Pausan, to be published).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the process of social learning first coded by Vygotsky, who

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believed that community is central for "making meaning" (McLeod, 2018), language, as well as social interaction with peers, play a critical role in shaping thought. Social learning provides the scaffolding (Bakurst and Shanker, 2001) that would allow individuals to successfully create value and negotiate meaning within and across cultures.

Wenger posits that learning is social participation, inasmuch as identity, meaning, and practice are closely interconnected in communities. His concept of CoP refers to the community as a "joined enterprise" where members agree ("mutual engagement") to share expertise and experience ("shared repertoire") to grow and enhance the practice/learning. This learning also expands identity through participation either as engagement, imagination, or alignment. It allows CoP members to successfully navigate new boundaries by moving freely between periphery and centre, and create coordination between different (cultural) perspectives. [5].

After further study, Wenger identifies several stages of CoP creation as a recipe for formal organisations to use the CoP benefits to propitiate learning and make use of individual and collaborative strengths. These stages are: planning, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, transformation [5].

This article will correlate these stages with the course chronological development to give evidence on the CoP.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This article uses a chronological narrative approach. The researcher will give evidence of the CoP stages by correlating it with the course journal and the participants' reflections. Although some communities take months, if not years, to cycle through all stages, it is possible to identify Wenger's principles in a short-term course, thus demonstrating the multi-pronged functionality of his approach [4].

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

While Wenger's first research investigates the creation of communities he later dubbed CoP, in later work he claims CoPs can be created by using several steps and by observing some basic principles related to the three defining axes: domain, community, and practice [2].

*Planning* is the first stage. The training course was planned by the organisers by defining the domain and identifying the engaging issues: the shared interest in stories and learning about digital tools. The participants were selected based on a form they filled detailing their experience and their motivation for attending the course - similar with an interview for potential CoP members.

The CoP coordinators – the trainers - played a crucial role for the new community: a puzzle game for the introduction; presenting the objectives of the course and the milestone for the end-goals; detailing the principles and the rules of engagement (no judgement, respect, team-work); setting up games so the participants begin to interact and share stories; paying attention to the level of engagement and intervening when necessary to move things along. They also kept up a leitmotif about the importance of stories in general and of personal stories in particular, which focused the participants on the main theme of the course.

At the second stage, the CoP began *coalescing*. The participants began to communicate more about their personal experiences outside the course material. They also experimented with languages: two of the participants from Spain did not speak English well and two were hearing impaired, thus needing a sign-language interpreter. The Portuguese team could also speak Spanish, so the conversation occurred as a mix between English, Spanish, with a lot of hand gestures and translation. The members from the same country started to drift toward different groups and the conversation veered from stories to food, favorite movies, drinks, to history, culture, politics.

Various team-building exercises ensured the participants began working with each-other as a team to produce results that were then discussed in the larger group. The cohesion was quite fragile, each individual exploring the cultural differences and disagreeing on work methods. At the same time, the CoP began to emerge as they were also sharing their personal experiences, likes and dislikes, and new ideas about the course' objectives. Nurturing the nascent climate of trust and respect, the next task saw participants simply writing a story relevant for them. Out of the twenty-four stories, through elimination rounds, six stories remained.

These stories would undergo a complete process of transformation in the next CoP phase, *maturing*. The members put together all their efforts, ideas, imagination, and expertise, to reify [5] the CoP. Each team took a written story and imagined it as a movie. This involved creativity, patience, team-work, and action. C from Spain confessed that “ for me, a nice experience. It was difficult to come up with the idea, because we had different ideas”.

The creation process itself was a learning experience, as it required the CoP members to use and integrate the new information gained, but also to make use of their previous experience and skills in ways they did not use before. As D from Portugal stated “ the most admirable for me is that actually I'm not that good at technology, but none of us imagined the movie that came out...we started brainstorming, decided we wanted a metaphor...we were really amazed at the creativity that came with not knowing what to do”.

One of the stories in particular was a kaleidoscope of the shared stories as it presented a three minute movie about different peoples telling their stories: fall of the Iron curtain and a Queen concert, how it feels to be a Vietnamese born in the

Czech republic, a bartender working during the summer to earn money but wanting to go to America. They were all inside stories, and evidence of the confidence the members had to share their dreams to each other and, through technology, with the world. During the reflexive feedback session, R from Spain recalled this as “beginning difficult to work, to collaborate and little the people adapted. I feel happy with the result”. As with any CoP , the artefacts obtained measure the learning and sharing done by and with the community.

In Wenger's sequence, the next phase is *stewardship*, when the CoP would mentor new members and seek relationships outside. In our version of the CoP, this stage would be equivalent to presenting the final artefacts to an audience formed both from the creators and from different officials and other NGO members. It was an emotional process that prompted different questions on the creation process. It also introduced an outsider perspective on the artefacts. The feedback was generous and the participants were impressed by the impact their stories had on other people. The feedback loop allowed a new view on the power of personal stories and how much transformation and work can happen between the original idea and the end-result.

CoPs subsequently undergo *transformation*, the stage where the members drift away and the CoP dies or gains different focus, corresponding to the needs and shared interests of the new members. Once the course ended, the participants remained in contact on a Facebook group. Some of them created and posted new videos with powerful themes such as tolerance, perspective on homeless people, freedom.

## V. CONCLUSION

Twenty-four participants from six European countries created a CoP with the purpose of sharing their stories. Together, they co-created an immersive social learning experience that culminated into powerful stories born by their cultural differences, personal experiences, and interaction. Further research can investigate the CoP potential and artefacts generated by European programs such as Erasmus+.

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