

E – The Community of Practice

Introduction

ASRVA has sought to determine an appropriate way of operating given its role and purpose. Neither a top-down or a purely member driven approach to design seems to fit. We see people participating in SRV theory and PASSING, then, without mentors, they mostly disappear. For people who, for example, come together to learn book binding or crocheting, they need little more than the interest group along with sponsored training and other events. For people using a body of knowledge, such as social work, they become part of a professional association. The association accredits them and importantly, provides training, updating of skills and knowledge, opportunities for networking, connecting of people on particular interest areas, and so on. For people using SRV, they have little like this. As stated above, they might have a mentor (but not for many), their local group (if there is one) might put on the occasional networking or skills updating event. But overall, it is very hit and miss. With all of this in mind, ASRVA has settled on adopting a Community of Practice mode of operation. This is useful, at the highest level, to:

- ensure the continuation of a core group driving the activities of the organisation
- re-energise and re-engage people, thus leading to increased morale and confidence in the future
- create a network, that is, connections of individuals committed to the continuation of SRV and its application
- develop a strong focus on application while maintaining teaching knowledge and skills
- enable people with the community of practice to increase their knowledge, skills, confidence, and motivation to develop their own practice
- make a contribution to the wider SRV sector in Australia and indeed, in other countries, by sharing knowledge and expertise.

ASRVA believes that the Community of Practice model perfectly suits what ASRVA is wanting to achieve given the context in which SRV exists.

What is at the heart of a Community of Practice?

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell:

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

Three characteristics are crucial:

1. the Community, its membership, the relationships and interactions – SRV enthusiasts – members of a specific domain interact and engage in shared activities, help each other, and share information with each other. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other.
2. the Domain or context, its identity and focus – assisting people get the good things of life – it has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest; membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.
3. the Practice, its methods, knowledge and expertise – SRV – members of a community of practice are practitioners (whether informal or formal). They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction,

and these are essential too:

- the value it brings to its members – see ASRVA's paper on Benefits of ASRVA membership
- the willingness of its members to contribute and share their knowledge and expertise.

Why use it?

Using the community of practice model will assist ASRVA to provide five critical functions. It will:

1. **educate** by collecting and sharing information related to questions and issues of practice

2. **support** by organising interactions and collaboration among members
3. **cultivate** by assisting groups to start and sustain their learning
4. **encourage** by promoting the work of members through discussion and sharing
5. **integrate** by encouraging members to use their new knowledge for real change in their own work.

Communities of practice are important and useful in both personal, informal situations (art group, bookbinding club, knitting group) and professional learning contexts, because they have the potential to achieve the following, all of which ASRVA are focussed on:

- **connecting people** who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact, either as frequently or at all
- **providing a shared context** for people to communicate and share information, stories and personal experiences in a way that builds understanding and insight
- **enabling dialogue** between people who come together to explore new possibilities, solve challenging problems, and create new, mutually beneficial opportunities
- **stimulating learning** by serving as a vehicle for authentic communication, mentoring, coaching, and self-reflection
- **capturing and sharing existing knowledge** to help people improve their practice by providing a forum to identify solutions to common problems and a process to collect and evaluate best practices
- **introducing collaborative processes** to groups and organisations to encourage the free flow of ideas and exchange of information
- **assisting people organise** around purposeful actions that develop tangible results, for example, promoting skills for people to gather others to work on an issue or change for a devalued person
- **generating new knowledge** to help people transform their practice to accommodate changes in needs and technologies. (*Adapted from Cambridge, Kaplan & Suter*)

The learning needs of families and people using SRV theory takes place in circumstances that have unique or certainly challenging contexts. Communities of practice offer a robust strategy for learning in such situations. Here is why:

- **Complex problems** require more implicit knowledge, which cannot be codified.
- **Implicit knowledge** can only be shared through conversations and observation.

- **Collaborative and distributed work** is becoming the norm.
- **Knowledge sharing and narration of work** make implicit knowledge more visible.
- **New ideas come from diverse networks**, often from outside the organisation.
- **Learning is part of work**, not separate from it. Communities of practice enable the integration of work and learning.

The value of communities of practice is in the depth of participants' reflection and inquiry, and how they put co-created knowledge to action in their efforts to see devalued people get the good things of life.

Structure, or, more accurately, Roles and Relationships

The Community of Practice, the types of engagement through various roles and relationships will likely look like this:

- **Core Group** (the Directors), (the current 7+ ASRVA members).
- **Active** – those with a specified role in ASRVA whether programmatic or non-programmatic, for example, presenters, team leaders, bookkeeper.
- **Occasional** – assists with a specific task at a point in time then withdraws until engaging on another matter, for example, a person in a local group who organises ASRVA-Local Group Meetings.
- **Potential (colleagues)** – has done SRV/PASSING and probably uses it but is not actively/regularly engaged with ASRVA.
- **Transactional** – organisations whose meeting room we use, professional conference rooms, PASSING sites.

This is an illustration in the Community of Practice circles style:

ASRVA illustrated in Community of Practice
circles style

