

"Toward a Discipleship Infrasystem:
Integrating Communities of Learning, Communities of Practice and Communities of Faith."

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Abstract

This study presents research findings and implications for the contemporary evangelical and ecclesial audience to fulfill the biblical command to ‘make disciples’ (Matthew 28:19). In an era of technological advancement, societal shifts, spiritual decline, and educational upheaval the integration of different arenas of life is essential. Amid this climate, the effectiveness of educational institutions, local congregations, and professional organizations operating independently to fulfill the goal of Christian disciple-making is in question. An anti-silo approach is imperative. The various environments of formal and informal education (communities of learning), the marketplace, home, and third spaces (communities of practice), and the church (communities of faith) can function to serve interdependently and foundationally for one other. The research seeks to define the distinct communities, explore the relationship between them, and explore areas of individual growth among participants. Reflecting the Holy Trinity, a true model of servant inter-dependence, the study realistically integrates these three communities into an infrasystem of discipleship with multiple entry points including, Christian higher education, so the actions of going, baptizing, and teaching of disciple-making are realized.

Introduction

Compartmentalization of family life, education, and work escalated during the past century. While some benefits are obvious, compartmentalization introduced some points of fracture. Excellence in the workplace isolated from moral or informed decisions has limitations. Similarly, information with no outlet for application is demotivating for contemporary learners. Finally, the absence of spiritual and moral training undermines holistic education and vocational experience.

Determining how three specific communities relate and interrelate is the central endeavor of this inquiry. The results include functional definitions, common characteristics, conjoined outcomes. In addition, examples and models are proposed.

Definitions

Each distinct community under review has unique definition. For the sake of the discussion in this paper the following functional definitions will be used:

Communities of Learning (CoL): “Groups of people who support each other in their collective and individual learning.”

Communities of Practice (CoP): “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.”

Communities of Faith (CoF): “Group of people who share a particular set of religious beliefs”

Infrasystem: Technical term used to describe links and connections of multiple systems in order to improve movement of information, product, or people.

Communities of Learning (CoL)

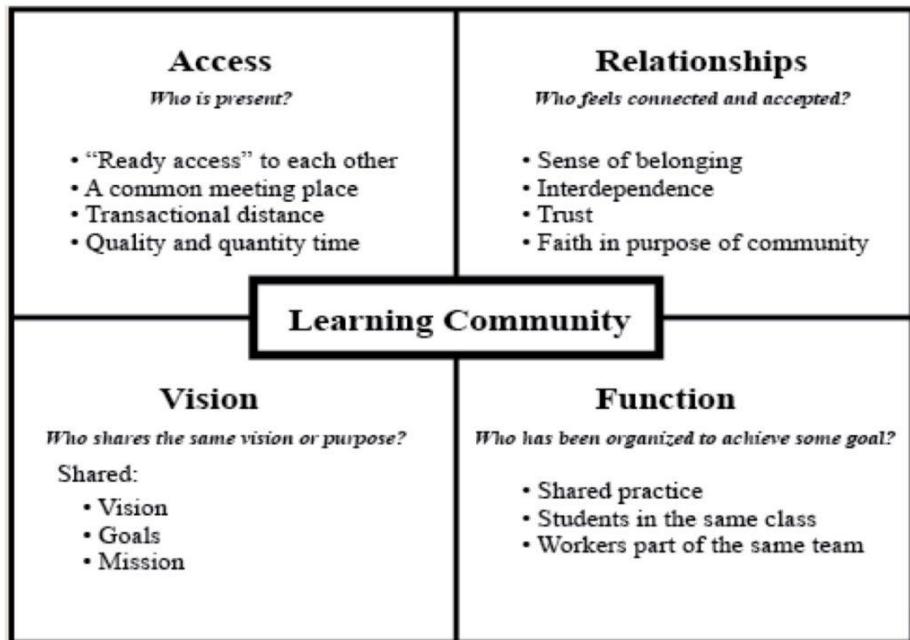
As noted a general definition of learning community is “a group of people who support each other in their collective and individual learning.” Adults may choose to attend academic courses, training workshops, or study groups for a variety of reasons. Adults are drawn to learning groups in order to obtain an academic degree, expand occupational opportunities, study specific topics of interest, explore new teaching/learning experiences or grow through life transitions. CoL’s can be formal or informal, organic or institutional, short term or long.

Communities of learning may transcend age groups or generational constructs. CoL's may demonstrate a number of specific qualities. One Christian school articulated the characteristics of the learning community as:

- Shared Values
- Meaningful Relationships
- Sense of Belonging
- Teacher Collaboration
- Experiential Learning (Lansing school)

Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, and Dunlap discerned seven qualities important for the formation of a learning communities: 1) shared goals; 2) safe and supportive conditions; 3) collective identity; 4) collaboration; 5) respectful inclusion; 6) progressive discourse toward knowledge building; and 7) mutual appropriation. (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, Dunlap, 2004)

West and Williams introduced a number qualities of communities of learning, namely: access, relationships, vision and function.



Notice that relationships, central to the nature of the groups, reflect four secondary attributes:

- **Belonging**
 - “Members of a community need to feel that they belong in the community, which includes feeling like one is similar enough or somehow shares a connection to the others.”
- **Interdependence**
 - “The members of the community need each other and feel needed by others within the community; they feel that they belong to a group larger than the individual self.”
- **Trust**
 - “Trust is instrumental to the emotional strength of the learning group.” “Related to trust is the feeling of being respected and valued within a community.”
- **Shared faith**
 - Part of belonging to a community is believing in the community as a whole—that the community should exist and will be sufficient to meet the members’ individual needs. (West and Williams, 2018)

Communities of Practice (CoP)

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.” (Wegner, 1998)

Three required components of CoPs:

- *There needs to be a domain.* A CoP has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest (e.g. radiologists, Star Trek fans, middle school history teachers, Viking football fans, etc.); it’s not just a network of people or club of friends. Membership implies a commitment to the domain.
- *There needs to be a community.* A necessary component is that 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.
- *There needs to be a practice.* They develop a shared repertoire of resources which can include stories, helpful tools, experiences, stories, ways of handling typical problems, etc. This kind of interaction needs to be developed over time. (Wenger, 1998)

Communities of Practice (CoPs) appear to be on the rise. Expansions in communication and cross-cultural engagement and intergenerational cooperation pave the way to more venues for CoP’s. The Wegners indicate three catalytic components are essential for group success: time, people, and money. Likewise, they report the importance of vision goals and values alignment (Wenger, 1998)

Communities of Faith (CoF)

Communities of Faith are “groups which possess shared religious or spiritual values and beliefs.” The term inherently includes a wider scope of religious practices; however the focus of this paper is limited to evangelical Christian churches and ministries.

True Christian faith was never to be an isolated reality. “The Christian faith comes to visibility in the world, not primarily in creeds, doctrine, liturgical forms or ecclesiastical organization, but in the lives of those people who are experiencing the faith, hope and love, which have the Christian quality...The Christian faith, by virtue of the very life of love to which it leads, is essentially a community affair.” (Geering) Churches and faith communities were the epicenter of civic and educational environments in the past century. While the value of spiritual development is certain, the place of faith in the future is in question.

For the sake of this presentation and to distinguish from other communities the researchers’ four attributes of faith communities are posited.

Grace (God’s position)—a God-given goodness of eternal life—quality and quantity—through Christ Jesus

Covenant (God’s invitation)—a God-initiated relationship; based on promises with needed obedience

Koinonia (God’s integration)—full partnership with God and fellow believers; life-sharing.

Kingdom Mission (God’s purpose)—expressions of service towards fellow man to expand Jesus’ Kingdom and manifest God’s glory

The Alban Institute introduced two important characteristics of faith communities, “Shared Language” and “Being Together.” People of faith embrace specialized verbiage representing traditions, rituals, and experiences unique to the community. “The distinctiveness of the congregational language is also essential for faith formation.”

A community creates opportunities for being together where the possibilities of shared values can move members to action in the public square, undertaken in a context of mutual concern and inspired by a corporate vision of the Church's mission in the world.

Additionally, a series of critical questions must be asked regularly to maintain the nature and mission of the faith community. (Alban Institute)

Christians have a unique personal and corporate identity and destiny. Evangelicals are noted for their faith in Christ (becoming), good works to and within communities (working), and learning (knowing). Historically, Christians have been champions of education and charitable works such as schools, hospitals, orphanages and more motivated by their belief that people can know Christ and be transformed into his likeness.,

Individuals have a specific faith development outcome. Romans 8:29 affirms conformity to the image of Christ as the final destination of the faith journey. Knight quoting Ellen White “To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul, that the divine purpose in his creation might be realized—this was to be the work of redemption.” (Knight, 2010)

Historically local churches were the primary communities of faith. However in a mobile and hyper-connected society the traditional expectations are diminishing. Jim Deming observed “Because being a member of a community of faith simply means we live with others into the future with hope and vision, regardless of any affiliation with an established faith tradition.” (Deming, 2011)

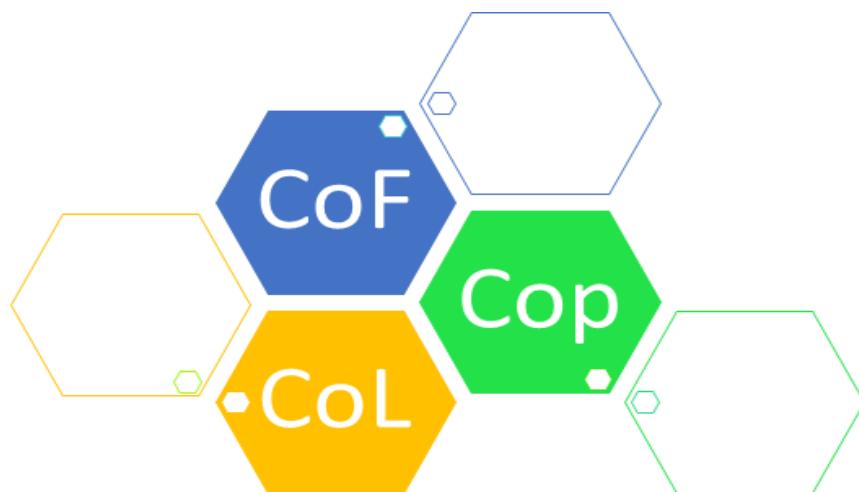
Relationships

The evaluation of CoL, CoP, and CoF share a number of qualities and attributes. In fact, a superficial review the internal operations and stated outcomes make it difficult to distinguish between the various communities.. The similarities can either facilitate a spirit of cooperation and collaboration or generate a sense of caution or fear. Each community must focus its attention on selected populations and contextual issues.

How do the various communities relate to each other? Three possibilities exist. First, the groups can be or perceive themselves to be in competition. Striving to attract people or resources to sustain a community can foster opposition with others. Second, groups may enjoy a complementarian view. The fundamental purpose of individual groups supplements tangential groups which include similar or same populations. Communities then are aware and reactive to other communities. Finally, the communities under investigation may possess common goals and characteristics. Commonality can stimulate cooperation and collaboration between groups resulting in mutual benefits.

Perception continuum	Relationship	Reaction	Interaction
Insecure	Compete	Insulation	Independent
	Complement	Isolation	Dependent
	Collaborate	Integration	Interdependent

The relationships between communities may be more aligned with the identity or self-perception of a particular community. We propose any community insecure or uncertain about its purpose or core values is more likely to fall into a competitive position while secure



organizations are open to partnerships and shared resources for the greater benefit of its members and participants.

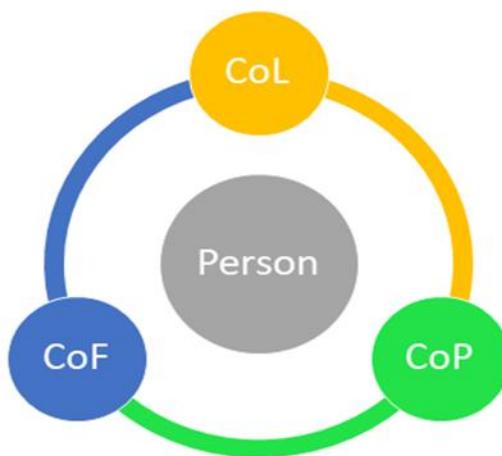
Types of members within the CoP are categorized as core, active, occasional, peripheral, and outside. These levels of member involvement equates closely to member engagement within Communities of Learning and to a greater level Communities of Faith.

A Proposed Discipleship Infrasystem: Integration Model

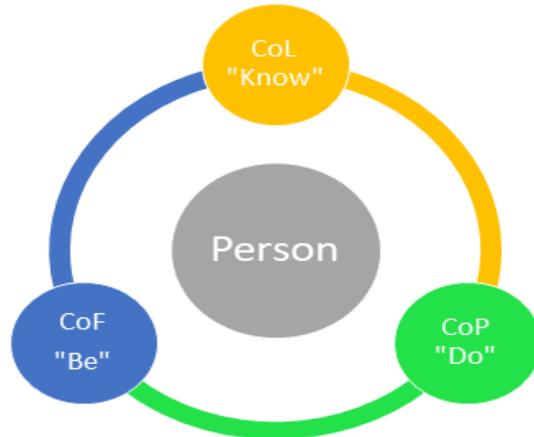
The proposed model is individual and begins with a trinitarian perspective. 2 Timothy 3:14-17 serves as the biblical foundation.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

This passage supports a “Know”, “Be”, “Do” model. Individuals are designed and destined to grow in knowledge, character, and practice. Following this parallel, CoL provide intellectual growth, CoF influence character development and CoP enhanced personal skills.



The proposed model has two phases. The first phase focuses on the individual as the central element. Individuals are engaged in multiple communities throughout their lifetime. Each community contributes to the intellectual, spiritual, relational, and vocational development of a person. Integration is experienced by the individual as he/she incorporates the knowledge, skills, and experiences gained from participating in each community.

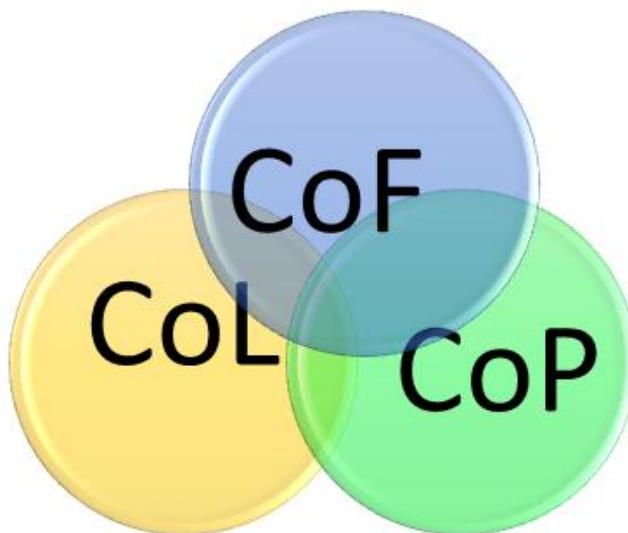


The second phase of the model is organizational and incorporates the best qualities of each community in a collaborative fashion. Various communities can partner to achieve mutual outcomes. Partnerships and teamwork give participants a robust experience while saving communities time, money, effort or other resources. Cooperative communities may share available facilities, (meeting spaces), technological tools, communication resources and especially leadership. Examples to consider, businesses allow Bible studies groups or professional organizations use of their offices. A church may host or partner with local ministry (church school, support groups, homeschool family group, Scout troupe, Businessman's luncheons). Medical Mission trips bring together medical professionals, missionaries, and compassionate volunteers for the benefit of others. In certain areas of the country gun ranges are not only a place to learn (CoL) about a specific hobby but can also be a place of missional effort by communities of faith. The same is true of sports leagues, gaming clubs and collectors clubs of all kinds. Schools such as community colleges and universities, primarily CoL are excellent environments to foster growth through mentoring programs and sponsoring professional gatherings. Schools can promote all of these with both academic programs on campus/online education--certificate/degree, vocation/trade enhancement. They are also the site for leisure learning groups which Christian leaders and Educators may lead.

The goal of integration is multifaceted: outreach and/or evangelism, spiritual transformation, healthy relationships, education advancement.

Application, Examples and Models

Dr Graham's oldest son moved to a new job in a new city. The job consumed much of his time. Even on weekends he was limited and not afforded consistent opportunity to attend church and connect to a community of faith. Within a couple of months after being at his new employment he was made aware of a weeknight Bible study with some of the guys who came to his workplace. Though not able to attend each week, our son found a spiritual niche with an informal community of faith through his community of practice.



Throughout the fabric of the American lifestyle are examples of these three communities linked through shared interest, causes, leadership, mission, environments, or outcomes. Communities may be formal or informal. A few examples come to mind.

- ESL classes are CoLs frequently hosted by churches to develop individuals, enhance community life, and religious witness.
- Cowboy Churches combine worship and Bible study with horse riding and calf roping.
- Workplace Chaplaincy integrates spiritual concern and Christian response to hurt or tragedy within work environments.
- Christian Motorcycle Clubs give believers an opportunity to ride, worship and witness together.

- MOPs (Mothers of Preschoolers) encourages and equips moms of young children to realize their potential as mothers, women and leaders, in relationship with Jesus, and in partnership with the local church.<https://www.mops.org/>.

A plethora of other active communities are visible such as HOA's, hobby clubs (running, hunting, collecting). Christian groups sponsor mission trips, workplace devotions and Bible studies. Perhaps the strongest example of CoP and CoL are in the field of nursing. Cohorts seeking to develop skills, expand knowledge and strengthen the guild effectively learn together and challenge one another toward best practices. One profession has captured the value of CoPs and use them extensively, Nursing Associations. (Mills, Birks, and Francis, 2014)

Conclusion

Christian Educators are uniquely positioned to pioneer and lead the integration of the communities within a locality to best serve the population and constituency. Daniels and Gustafson proposed that “faith-based colleges and universities are distinctively positioned to address social issues, engage in service to the local and global community, and to involve students, faculty, and administrators in this shared purpose. These institutions are uniquely accountable and have the greatest potential in this outcome precisely because of their faith commitment that both informs and motivates their policy and practice.” (Daniels, 2016)

Infrasystem researchers observed, “Our analysis suggests that an infrasystem transition depends on infrasystem architecture and on actors (regulators, planners versus users) given the multi-actor setting of infrasystems.” (Frantzeskaki and Loorbach, 2010) Applying this principle and following this pattern, Christian educators have a responsibility and calling to be instruments of change and catalytic leaders in the formation of emerging communities serving the larger society and advancing the kingdom of God.

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Infrasystems Listening Guide

Mark what characteristics describe which community(ies)

Characteristics	Communities of Learning	Communities of Practice	Communities of Faith
Information			
Skills Enhancement			
Collaborative Learning			
Belonging			
On the rise			
Shared language			
Individual → Collaborative			
Time, people, money			
Access			
Significance			
Purpose			
Spiritual Transformation			
Meaningful Relationships			
Vision and Values			
Meeting places and spaces			
Formal and Informal			
Communication			
Contribution to Society			

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- *Infrasystem*: Technical term used to describe links and connections of multiple systems in order to improve movement of information, product, or people.

Communities of Learning (CoL)

1) shared goals; 2) safe and supportive conditions; 3) collective identity; 4) collaboration; 5) respectful inclusion; 6) progressive discourse toward knowledge building; and 7) mutual appropriation. (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, Dunlap, 2004)

Communities of Practice (CoP)

- *There needs to be a domain.*
- *There needs to be a community.*
- *There needs to be a practice.* (Wenger,1998)

Communities of Faith (CoF)

Four attributes of faith communities are posited. Christians have a unique personal and corporate identity and destiny.

Grace (God's position)

Covenant (God's invitation)

Koinonia (God's integration)

Kingdom Mission (God's purpose)

Relationships

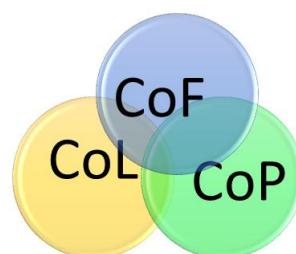
Perception continuum	Relationship	Reaction	Interaction
Insecure	Compete	Insulation	Independent
	Complement	Isolation	Dependent
	Collaborate	Integration	Interdependent

Common Attributes

- Shared Values
- Context or Populations
- Functions or Operations
- Similar Outcomes and Goals

A Proposed Discipleship Infrasystem: Integration Model

The proposed model is individual and begins with a trinitarian perspective. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)



Application, Examples and Models

- ESL classes
- Cowboy Churches
- Workplace Chaplaincy
- Christian Motorcycle Clubs
- MOPs (Mothers of Preschoolers)

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