

COACH-SPECIFIC COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND BROADER SOCIAL LEARNING SYSTEMS



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Introduction

Coaches play a highly influential role across the entire sport participation spectrum. Their proficiency, knowledgeability and competency is crucial to the progression, welfare and even the personal development of the athletes under their charge. Maximising the development of that proficiency is therefore a crucial concern for numerous sporting and community organisations. Effort must be directed toward the continuous improvement of learning and development programs for coaches, with consideration given to the differing requirements of coaches operating in different contexts.

Most coach education initiatives have entailed formal instruction in classroom settings, but feedback from participants suggests that this approach is sub-optimal. Better outcomes might be achieved through methods designed to promote more impactful learning and development opportunities within the confines of a Community of Practice [CoP]. Whilst available research evidence provides a strong rationale for use of such an approach, several scholars have pointed out that this is not a simple matter, since the cultivation of dynamic CoPs in a coach development context requires a thorough understanding of the concept and a willingness of key personnel from multiple organisations to work together. The following aims to assist with these tasks by challenging existing beliefs and assumptions and connecting new ideas to prior understandings.

What is a community of practice?

A CoP is a multi-purpose concept that grew out of a social theory of learning and the field of anthropology. It has conceptual, theoretical and practical applications, and is a perspective that views learning not just as an internally structured cognitive process but as a social and collaborative endeavour situated in the dynamic interactions of everyday life. It is not an isolated construct, however, and the concept does not exist by itself. Instead, it should be considered part of a broader sociocultural system of learning that enables knowledge to be produced across entire landscapes of practice.

*"Learning is bidirectional.
We learn from the
environment, and the
environment learns and is
modified thanks to our actions"*

- Albert Bandura



Paul Perkins is an associate Professor at the University of Canberra and a member of the Australian Institute of Sport High Performance Coach Development Team. He is a dedicated, passionate and experienced coach, educator and researcher with an extensive background in the Australian sport sector and a passion for helping others and seeing people succeed. Paul is skilled at, and highly experienced in developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating multi-layered sport-based development initiatives and has a thorough understanding of deductive, inductive and abductive reasoning and how these different processes can be used to draw conclusions, make predictions, and/or construct explanations. Whilst Paul's research has been multi-disciplinary and positioned within the broader societal context, he is currently exploring the benefits of more social and collaborative approaches to coach learning and is interested in contributing to long-term positive outcomes through the use of Australian First Nations methodologies.

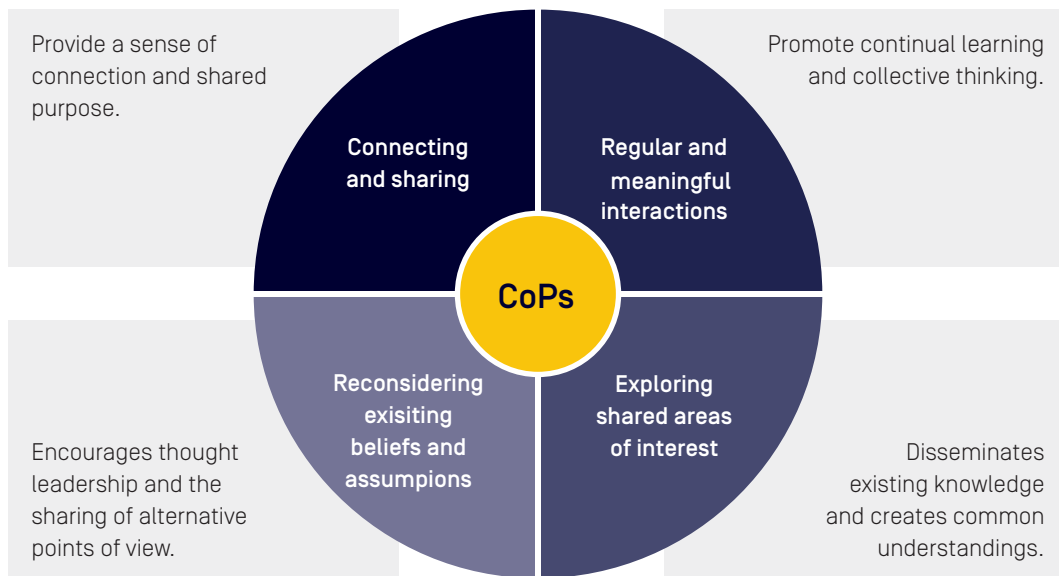
Benefits

While there is continuing debate as to how CoPs should be defined, most experts agree that they consist of people who share a common concern or have an interest in a particular topic and come together regularly to advance their practice by fulfilling both individual and group goals. Importantly, and as can be seen from the examples below, they have been successfully employed in multiple ways, including as:

- > A framework to support and encourage situational-based learning.
- > A mechanism for fostering innovation.
- > A driver of highly valuable socially constructed tacit knowledge.
- > A generator of social and reputation capital.
- > A theoretical lens to understand the benefits of social learning.

“CoPs are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”

- Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner



Operational models

As can be seen below, communities of practice will operate differently depending on the purpose and needs of the participants and can be as diverse as the situations that give rise to them. The [AIS Coach Summit Program](#), for instance, has elements from each of the models below that influence the way it functions and determines how it is experienced.

- > **Helping CoPs:** Provide non-judgmental spaces for community members to assist each other with day-to-day tasks that align with their common interests and needs.
- > **Best practice CoPs:** Share tips and trends and develop and disseminate best practice guidelines for wider use.
- > **Knowledge stewarding CoPs:** Curate, organise and manage domain-specific artifacts that members can refer to when they have questions or want to improve their craft.
- > **Innovation-focused CoPs:** Typically consist of people who have different levels of expertise and are passionate about contributing to an overall body of knowledge by creating breakthrough ideas and new practices.



Something to consider

The recent escalation in the development and uptake of video communication technologies for educational purposes is opening up new opportunities for connecting coaches with one another and with relevant external expertise.

This could encourage even greater dialogue between people with different perspectives and prove to be a major aid in supporting the development of [21st century coaches through the](#) cultivation and use of interprofessional [Virtual Communities of Practice \(VCoP\)](#).

Critical elements

The original notion of a CoP was closely aligned to apprenticeship models of learning that were characterised by three critical dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, with the last of these entailing the use of common resources and jargon. In 2002, these elements were reconfigured and renamed as domain, community and practice.

In this new definition, domain relates to the area of focus of the community and the competencies required to differentiate members from non-members. Community is seen as the social structures enabling interaction between members, and practice refers to the activities that are pursued in an attempt to achieve specific outcomes.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that active participation, reciprocal learning partnerships and **reification** (i.e., the ways relationships can create something of value) are required in order to make a CoP experience productive and meaningful.

To help address these and other potential concerns, **new roles** have been proposed and created. Interactional specialists known as community convenors and social learning leaders play an active role in the development process by providing critical guidance and support during sensitive periods of learning, helping with the interpretation of experiences, assisting with the translation of contemporary research into routine practice, and increasing the likelihood that interactions will remain beneficial and productive. The Table below highlights the importance of these roles and demonstrates how they can make a significant contribution to the development of new actionable knowledge and expertise.

Essential dimensions		
Domain	Community	Practice
A shared area of interest that community members are passionate about.	Members learning together by using common language and negotiating boundaries of learning.	Creating and sharing a range of resources, tools, artifacts and ideas.
Underpinning support (community convenors and social learning leaders)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Coordinating activities. > Managing group dynamics. > Helping members understand and apply new concepts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Encouraging thought leadership. > Sharing relevant knowledge and promoting <i>social intelligence</i>. > Helping with the translation of theory to practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Accurately documenting and recording experiences. > Identifying factors that support or hinder the learning process. > Helping with the interpretation of experiences.

“Don’t travel alone.... meet up with others who are traveling also on the path of change, you can learn from each other a lot and together carry more learning experiences (social learning and collective intelligence)”

- Nadia Dresscher-Lambertus

Suggestions to support the cultivation of coach-specific CoPs

Below is a list of practical suggestions to help guide and support the creation of coach-specific CoPs in a timely and logical way remembering that “as communities of practice emerge, we can support or encourage them, we can design for them, but we cannot design them” – see [Coming to Terms with Communities of Practice](#).

- STEP 1** **Define purpose and objectives**
Having clearly stated objectives not only provides a suitable framework to help guide the work but helps justify the actions and adds a layer of accountability for host organisations.
- STEP 2** **Develop project plan**
This should outline the aims and rationale of a project so that questions like the following can be answered. What needs to be done? When and where will the work take place? Who is going to do the work? How much will it cost?
- STEP 3** **Invite coaches**
This might involve a formal application process that promotes inclusivity, or it could be done in more organic ways (e.g., word-of-mouth).
- STEP 4** **Implement engagement strategies**
This is where the coaches, community convenors and social learning leaders start to interact with each other, and responsibilities, expected behaviours and social norms are created.
- STEP 5** **Create highly positive and supportive learning environments**
The aim here is to development a proactive learning community where members believe that their contributions matter and feel a sense of connection with each another.
- STEP 6** **Promote a culture of continuous improvement**
This could, for example, include repeated cycles of setting objectives, learning, improving, innovating, and sharing.

“The acquisition however perfectly of skills is not an end in itself. They are things to be put to use as a contribution to a common and shared life” – John Dewey

Additional considerations

The Table below provides a series of questions that community convenors, social learning leaders and group members may need to consider when creating their own coach-specific CoPs.

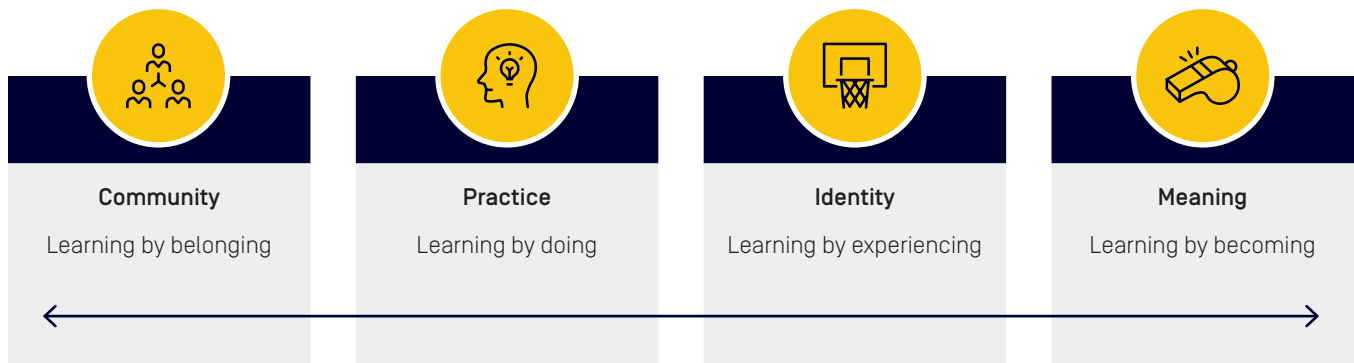
Domain	Community	Practice	Convening
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > What are we passionate about? > Why do we care? > What is our agenda? > How useful will we be to each other? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Who should be in our community? > What effect will their participation have on the dynamics of the group? > How do we manage the boundaries of our community? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > What should we do to learn together? > How can our practice become the curriculum? > How can we make our work visible and impactful? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > What is required to carry out a productive inquiry? > How can we encourage shared leadership? > What resources are available to support our work?

Learning within a coach-specific community of practice

Learning within the confines a coach-specific CoP requires an ability to identify needs, set objectives, understand what resources are required for achievement of successful outcomes, develop and apply the appropriate strategies, and evaluate outcomes with or without the help of outsiders. This autonomous approach to development is in stark contrast to the “patterning and dependency” methods currently employed in the Australian vocational and educational training sector and involves the social formation of a person rather than just the acquisition of knowledge. The illustration below is a visual representation of this [highly dynamic process](#) and is intended to show how the multiple interacting learning trajectories and socially constructed relationships that make up these shared endeavours provide opportunities for coaches to pursue a particular form of learning in an attempt to make a difference to something they are deeply passionate about through engagement in meaningful discussions and the examination of real-world experiences.

“I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things”

–Mother Teresa.



Levels of engagement

Genuine CoPs are self-organising and hierarchy-free learning spaces that encourage solution-focused behaviour by providing opportunities for people to determine their own level of engagement and frequency of participation. As can be seen below, this more natural approach to learning not only offers coaches greater flexibility but empowers them to engage and interact in ways that best meets their needs.

- > **The core group:** Consists of the people who initially take on and perform the organisation, facilitation and administration tasks of a community (e.g., the convenors and social learning leaders) and is the driving force behind coach-specific CoPs.
- > **Active participants:** Coaches within this category tend to be highly engaging and very passionate about their communities and will usually make significant contributions to its development. However, and perhaps most importantly, some of these participants will eventually become members of the core group and transition into leadership roles, or branch out and start their own CoPs.
- > **Occasional visitors:** Are selective about their participation and usually only get involved when an activity and/or topic is of direct and immediate interest to them. This could be due to competing commitments, a lack of time, and/or a lack of full investment in the community.
- > **Peripheral members:** Are either aiming for full membership or have found a level of engagement that satisfies and fulfills their needs. Coaches within this group will mostly just listen rather than contribute to discussions and are not usually predisposed to sharing their own information.
- > **Transactional guests:** As the name suggests, people in this category are not actual members of the community but still have occasional interactions with the group. A subject matter expert sharing highly relevant insights or a technological steward providing online support and guidance are examples of this kind of engagement within a coach-specific CoP.

Please note: The above information is based on material retrieved from this [excellent resource](#).

Knowledge generation and production

Knowledge production within a CoP is considered a socially constructed activity embedded within the concepts of accessibility, self-sufficiency and interdependent learning. It therefore requires continuous negotiation of meaning-making experiences and involves the re-shaping, re-producing and re-using of shared information, rather than the direct transfer of original material. The following summarises the underlying principles that guide these transformative knowledge generating processes.

- > Human beings are fundamentally social and learning is at the very core of our existence.
- > Social structures encourage meaningful interactions.
- > People's identities change as they learn.
- > Knowledge is attained from active participation in enterprises that people value.
- > **Canonical** accounts of work practices are inevitably flawed, inflexible and limited.
- > Innovation requires more than the reproduction of existing knowledge.

The contrasting nature of knowledge

The information below aims to further support the creation of highly productive coach-specific CoPs by building upon the above explanations and highlighting how the use of collective wisdom rather than canonical forms of knowledge encourages new ways of **thinking and learning**.

Canonical knowledge	Non-canonical knowledge
Abstract	Situated
Written texts	Personal narratives
Tightly formatted	Loosely structured
Imposed	Improvised
Limiting	Enabling
Individualising	Collaborative
Alienating	Identities are created and accepted
Makes use of existing information	Utilises group wisdom

Life cycles and stages of development

The ways in which communities emerge from and are continuously shaped by the characteristics and interactions of their members must be considered when thinking about cultivating a coach-specific CoP. Whilst a number of models have been used to describe the ways in which these living entities grow, evolve, mature, and eventual cease to existence, the framework below is based on a prominent **5-stage developmental model** and summarises the different phases a learning community typically passes through over the course of its life.

Stage	Examples
Potential	Coaches start to connect with each other and contemplate forming a community to support their growth and development. Alternatively, an organisation may have a particular topic it wants to explore or an area of focus it is keen to improve, and may use a top-down approach to support these initiatives by selecting and assigning leadership roles and sending out EOs to attract participants.
Coalescing	The community begins to take shape as members recognise the benefits of shared endeavours, regular interactions and collective wisdom.
Active	The community is now solidified and fully operational. It is during this stage when important outcomes (such as those listed below) are achieved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Creation of highly valuable cognitive and physical artifacts. > Development of supportive relationships. > Cultivation of respectful and encouraging environments. > Consideration of new ideas, habits and behaviours. > Development of a pro-active learning community that is responsive to the specific needs of its members.
Dispersing	While the community is still active during this stage, members are no longer engaging as intensely and other commitments and interests are now the priorities. This may be the result of naturally occurring changes to the community, a realignment of personal values, or because objectives have been met.
Memorable	The community is no longer active but coaches remember it fondly and continue to share their stories and artifacts.

Potential issues and concerns

Whilst the information presented so far makes it clear that potential exists for the use of CoPs as a means to advance the learning, development and professional status of sport coaches, attention should be given to the reported experiences outlined below before attempting to cultivate a coach-specific learning community.

- > A well-established hierarchy within a coaching group inhibited interactions with other less experienced coaches, meaning that the latter were afforded almost no opportunity for meaningful participation in discussions.
- > A coaching community ceased to operate when a researcher who was also the facilitator of the group withdrew from the facilitating role.
- > The mindset of some coaches wasn't conducive to the collaborative spirit typically regarded as requisite to a community of practice.
- > CoPs can sometimes become exclusive, insular, and resistant to positive change and therefore need to be carefully managed.
- > Some information shared within a CoP served only to reinforce existing values, behaviours and beliefs.
- > Implementing new ideas simply because it sounded or looked better has had negative ramifications for some coaches.
- > Lack of ability to critically reflect on the nature of their epistemological beliefs and current practices limited development opportunities for some coaches.
- > Pre-existing beliefs, attitudes and dispositions resulted in selective acceptance of certain types of knowledge and behaviour over others.

"You should never try to be better than someone else, you should always be learning from others. But you should never cease trying to be the best you could be because that's under your control and the other isn't"

– Coach John Wooden

Evaluating a coach-specific CoP

A final matter worth considering is the tendency for people to describe any kind of group work, networking, or informal learning experience as a CoP without fully understanding and/or appreciating the theory that underpins these highly complex social endeavours. The following aims to help address this concern by highlighting the differences between CoPs and other forms of social learning and is based on a set of [criteria](#) that can be used to evaluate the extent to which important observable characteristics become visible once a coach-specific CoP emerges.

Criterion 1: A Common practice and shared enterprise

- > There are observable activities and interactions that reflect common practices or mutual enterprises.
- > The group has produced artifacts that detail common practices, shared experiences and/or mutual enterprises.

Criterion 2: Opportunities for interaction and participation

- > The context provides opportunities for "newcomers" and "old-timers" to have meaningful participation.
- > The interaction and participation opportunities are structured in a way that directly relates to the common practices of the group.

Criterion 3: Mutual interdependence

- > The group includes members who have diverse expertise and knowledge and depend on one another for solving problems and completion of group tasks.
- > The group functions within a broader societal role that gives it, and the practices, meaning and purpose.

Criterion 4: Overlapping histories, practices, and understandings

- > There is a core knowledge base that defines what practices and meanings are associated with the group and mechanisms for the development of new, socially agreed upon goals, practices, and understandings are in place.
- > Members of the group know each other or about each other and the contributions they have made to their respective domains.

Criterion 5: Mechanisms for reproduction

- > The group has a history that has continued beyond the completion of a particular task.
- > The community passes through multiple cycles that enable newcomers to become old-timers.

Criteria 6: Respect for diverse perspectives and minority views

- > The environment provides even and fair opportunities for members from different backgrounds to participate and make contributions.
- > Members show politeness toward diverse and minority perspectives and are satisfied that their individual perspectives have been fully understood and respected.

Systems thinking and landscapes of practice

As mentioned earlier in the paper, CoPs should not be seen as isolated entities focused only on localised and situated workplace practices, but as critical elements of broader interrelated social systems that are dependent on each other for the scalability of learning across entire [Landscapes of Practice](#) (LoPs). Adopting this system approach (i.e., making sense of complex systems by exploring their interrelated parts, boundaries and functionalities) builds upon and adds another layer to the CoP concept by demonstrating how the interconnected, self-governing learning partnerships and organisations within the same bodies of knowledge are accountable to one another in terms of their respective practice-based learning and development (HP coaching).

System characteristics

When considering the above, it is important to note that sociocultural learning systems require certain characteristics to be effective. These include:

- > **Emergent structures:** The ways in which learning communities and partnerships form and evolve over time and (in most cases) eventually dissolve.
- > **Self-organisation:** The way spontaneous order arises from initially disordered systems and situations.
- > **Complex relationships:** The way that different experiences, values and beliefs, which may differ strongly between members, create dynamic interactions and **collective efficacy** in multi-person settings.
- > **Dynamic boundaries:** The objectified forms of social difference that distinguish members who are involved in a learning community from those who are not.
- > **Opportunities for ongoing identity negotiation:** The complex processes that enable community members to achieve their interactional obligations whilst also acquiring identity-related professional development outcomes (e.g., skilful custodians with 21st century thinking skills – critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity).

Identification in a landscape of practice

There are three distinct forms of identification that position learning within a LoP and enables successful collaboration across professional boundaries. Together, they demonstrate a need to move beyond domain-specific practice to broader system thinking and are summarised below within a HP sporting context.

- > **Engagement:** Involves working alone and with others, creating and sharing artifacts, and engaging in a range of activities and experiences that relate to a HP coaching body of knowledge.
- > **Imagination:** Requires an ability to reflect on current situations, think about new possibilities and construct images of the world to better understand how a forward thinking, fully inclusive, Australian HP coaching landscape of practice could be created.
- > **Alignment:** Includes following established norms, challenging when required, seeing and acknowledging different perspectives, negotiating difficult situations, and developing mutually beneficial outcomes by bringing greater **congruence** to HP coach development whilst decreasing the potential for costly mistakes.



Key terms and definitions

Below, is a summary of the key terms used by [global theorist](#) to describe the practical implications of implementing initiatives using a social theory of learning (CoPs, value creation stories, social learning spaces and LoPs) that might be relevant to our work.

- > **Competency:** Refers to the socially negotiated situated curriculum of what is required to perform a particular task as a recognised member of a community. In addition to being competent in a given CoP, practitioners also need to develop and continually update their knowledge of the broader and relevant LoP (e.g., HP sport knowledgeability).
- > **Vertical knowledge:** Is the depth of understanding a practitioner has in a particular domain. For example, a coach with formal training and considerable experience in skill acquisition would have extensive vertical knowledge of that topic.
- > **Horizontal knowledge:** Is having a broad understanding of relevant domain-specific topics. In HP coaching, this could include subjects such as: psychology, physical preparation, team management, physiology, and performance analysis.
- > **Knowledgeability:** Is the outcome of learning achieved through active participation across a landscape that includes a lot of practices in which a person cannot claim competence (e.g., a physiologist may not have head coach competency and vice-versa).
- > **Membership:** Due to people's inevitable differences in terms of their needs, wants, abilities and willingness to invest time in shared practices with others, CoP and LoP memberships are considered multilayered constructs. Core members, for instance, are generally made up of experienced "old-timers" while members who have found a level of engagement that satisfies their needs or are aiming to gain full membership tend to engage at the periphery.
- > **Legitimate peripheral participation:** Builds on the above and refers to the process by which newcomers become experienced members.
- > **Epistemic boundaries:** Are created from sustained CoP memberships that create "histories of learning" and prevent full participation to individuals who don't have access to those histories. These boundaries, however, should not be considered as constraining or negative connotations, since they distinguish those who have been involved from those who have not, and are a sign that "serious learning is taking place". This is an important point and something worth considering because it is at the boundaries of a community that [new ideas and innovations](#) are most likely to take place.

Social learning spaces

Although a relatively new and lesser known concept, Social Learning Spaces (SLSs) are similar to CoPs in so much as they both encourage meaningful interactions and the reformulations of ideas. It emerged in response to criticism that learning within a CoP tended to be conditional on members belonging to a shared domain of practice with the same regime of competence. That idea has been revised, however, and it is now proposed that very effective learning can take place within the [social spaces](#) outside CoPs via a range of inexpensive and highly effective mechanisms, including:

- > Yarning with peers.
- > Participating with colleagues in formal and non-formal coach learning events.
- > Online catch ups with peers and colleagues.
- > Sporadic post-training conversations with other coaches and athletes.
- > One-off chance meetings at conferences, competitions and/or workshops.
- > Engaging in networking activities.

Regardless of where they arise or how they occur, it is important not to think of SLSs as physical domains but as the structural features and personal characteristics that promote and enable learning to take place across a range of settings. These traits and features are summarised below using a coach development context.

1. **Caring to make a difference:** Coaches engage in the space because they see an opportunity to share an idea, pursue an inquiry, enhance an existing **capability**, or **further develop** themselves.
2. **A willingness to engage in the uncertainty:** Coaches are willing and prepared to address their concerns about being involved in any potential projects (e.g., To what extent is this possible? What's required to carry out the work? Is it worth my time and effort?)
3. **An ability to pay attention:** Coaches are prepared and have an ability to challenge their own assumptions, be open to new ideas, consider alternative points-of-view, and resist certain opinions and/or forms of feedback.

As can be seen from this brief summary, learning in social learning spaces is much more flexible than that in a CoP and does not have the same structural and interactional requirements. This means that the initiation of learning processes are driven by people who feel so strongly about an issue that they are prepared to invest their time and effort exploring it even when outcomes and objectives are not clear. In other words, the exact nature of the difference people are keen to make need not be specified at the outset, since it can arise overtime in spontaneous and self-organising ways.

Putting it all together

The diagram below demonstrates how an Australian HP coach development LoP could be cultivated. Whilst only an initial attempt, it is hoped that it can at least serve as a basis for future discussions.



Summary and key points

- > This paper attempts to summarise some very complex theories and concepts.
- > It highlights that CoPs have been successfully employed in multiple ways and that the development of dynamic CoPs could be well worth pursuing in a coach development context.
- > It demonstrates that learning partnerships within these collective endeavours must be seen as having benefit to remain productive and that there may be a need for community convenors and social learning leaders to help achieve and maintain this perception.
- > It reveals that the CoP concept is often misused.
- > It presents a set of criteria and list of definitions to help address current misunderstandings concerning the nature of CoPs and guide future discussions.
- > It provides an overview of systems thinking and the newer concepts of SLs and LoPs.
- > It highlights a need to move beyond domain-specific practices and thinking to more collaborative efforts.

Reflections

- > Can the information presented within this paper be of any use to you and your work?
- > How effective do you think the CoPs, LoPs and SLs concepts are for HP coach learning and development?
- > To what extent do the CoPs in which you're currently involved meet the criteria outlined in this document?
- > Could some of the work characterised as taking place with a CoP be described more accurately?
- > Is there a need for social learning leaders and community convenors in coach development?
- > Is it possible to apply the LoPs and SLs concepts to Australian HP coaching?
- > Could HP coach development be repositioned and reconceptualised as occurring within a LoP?
- > Could the repositioning and reconceptualising be underpinned by First Nations methodologies (co-creating artifacts, storytelling, information-sharing circles, yarning, kinship, and introspective self-analysis)?
- > Would implementation of such an approach make things clearer and more effective, or just more complicated?