

# **Improving professionalism through reflection and discourse in communities of practice: the key situations in social work model and project.**

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# **Improving professionalism through reflection and discourse in communities of practice: the key situations in social work model and project.**

## **Abstract**

Professional social work under conditions of uncertainty and complexity requires integration of various forms of knowledge, practice and values and entails managing emotions skilfully to make ethical professional judgements. The article discusses these challenges for social work(ers) and introduces the key situation in social work model. It consists of a systematic reflection process of typical, reoccurring practice situations in communities of practice (CoPs). Situated knowledge, memorised in relation to situations is dominant and is more easily accessed in practice. Situated knowledge, co-produced in reflections on key situations, is documented and shared on a virtual platform. Therefore, the model offers a concept for situated knowledge management and for discursive examination in professional and scientific communities. In the #keysituation project a platform was constructed and 10 CoPs with 35 active members from practice and academia quality assure its content. Based on the literature nine design principles for CoPs are suggested. The authors describe how these were applied. Success and failure depends on balancing three constituent aspects of CoPs: domain, community and practice. The model offers a flexible approach to continuous professional development (CPD), which fosters a learning culture essential to overcome managerial, technocratic approaches so prevalent in social work organisations.

## 1. Introduction

The demand for lifelong learning and for learning organisations are a response to the need of finding ways of dealing with increasing amounts and the short-lived nature of knowledge. Reviews into social work education and practice are also demanding attention to quality and professional judgments (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Munro, 2011). The profession needs to develop flexible forms of CPD. This drive for enhanced professionalism is affected by austerity, competitiveness and associated pressures on practice.

In this context the notion of learning through participation in communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) offers a promising concept, which has been taken up by large organisations (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). These have implemented CoPs with the objective of making the tacit knowledge of their employees visible for others and of establishing organisational learning loops (Bettoni, Clases & Wehner, 2004). CoPs help to build links between theory, research and practice and take an integrative role in knowledge management. They negotiate between organisational and personal perspectives, between situated action and knowledge and enable the creation and dissemination of knowledge (Reinmann-Rothmeier, 2001).

Wenger et al. (2002) define communities of practice as: ‘...groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis’. Wenger (2004) names three constitutive characteristics of CoPs: ‘Domain’, as a common area of interest and a focus; ‘community’, as a group of people for whom the domain is significant and who form bonds in the process of their shared activities, enabling collective learning and; ‘practice anchors the learning in what people do’ (Wenger, 2004, p.3). Voluntary participation and managerial independence are seen as central principles and support ongoing interest and a passion for the knowledge area (Wenger et al., 2002). Theoretical and empirical work on design of CoPs reveals that the success and failure of CoPs seems to be dependent on the interplay of the three constituent aspects (domain, community and practice (Probst & Borzillo, 2008).

CoPs support reflection, which in social work is seen as essential. The authors developed the ‘Key Situations’ reflection model for social work education and continuous professional development (CPD) with undergraduate students and post-qualifying practice educators. The systematic reflection process in eight steps is undertaken in CoPs (Tov, et al., 2015; Tov, Kunz & Stämpfli, 2013; Staempfli, et al., 2012). In this process participants enhance their knowledge, develop their professionalism and outline possible solutions to challenges in social work practice situations.

Key situations are typical and reoccurring practice situations. They are characterized by generalisable and specific features, which are both seen as important and relevant for professional practice. From the practitioners' perspective, situations are experienced as an uninterrupted course of action. 'Taking a referral' is an example of such a typical, reoccurring situation, which can take place in different contexts such as social services' teams, community based services, residential homes or hospitals. The referral may be for a child, an adolescent, an adult or for a whole family, or community. These contexts generate unique and specific situations, yet at the same time there are generalisable features, which are common for all settings and service user groups.

Unlike in most reflection processes, the situated knowledge co-produced in reflections and discourse on key situations, is documented and shared on a virtual platform. It can thus be shared across organisations and is opened up to discursive examination. Therefore, the model is also concept for situated knowledge management.

We have been working with CoPs in the context of theory-practice integration seminars since 2009, in which students reflect on *one* key situation over a number of weeks. We are also using the model in practice education training. We have evaluated the reflection model and discussed it in depth on the basis of a number of (social-)constructivist learning theories (Tov, Kunz & Stämpfli, 2013).

In this article we discuss the challenges of linking theory, practice and values and describe how the 'key situations in social work' reflection model helps to address these. Based on a literature review we suggest nine design principles for CoPs and discuss how we have applied them in the formation of CoPs as part of the #keysituation project. The article ends with an outlook and suggest areas for further research and developments.

## **2. Professionalism: Linking practice, diverse knowledge forms and values**

One of the challenges in working with CoPs is 'to "open-up" new learning opportunities by bringing together those workers who may not usually collaborate together' (Hennessy & Anderson, 2013, p.4). This applies to CoPs within one organisation and even more so, if members from different organisations participate. In the key situation network, CoPs consist of members from practice and academia. This entails challenges associated with the different systems of social work as a scientific discipline and as professional practice.

While in the scientific discipline, the discovery of truth combined with the necessity for justification are the guiding principles, the reference criteria for practice are effectiveness and the necessity to

act (von Spiegel, 2008). Grady and King Keenan (2104) argue that there is a dichotomous split between social work as an art and as a scientific discipline. Croisdale-Appleby (2014, p. 15) suggests that social workers need to be practitioners, professionals and social scientists. Therefore, qualifying education and CPD need to support the development of such integrated identities which combine both the art and the science perspective in order to wed 'the thinking and actions of how we use our knowledge, experience and professional use of self in the service of each individual and family client' (King Keenan & Grady, 2014, p. 203).

We have argued (Tov, et al., 2013; Staempfli et al., 2012) that the contested notion of 'use' or 'application' of scientific knowledge in practice has undergone a change over time and is now discussed under the term *Relationierung* (German for relating, integrating and linking) of different types of knowledge (von Spiegel, 2008). According to Dewe (2012) this is achieved by practitioners selectively choosing scientifically produced knowledge, interpreting this in the light of a specific practice challenge to finally merging it with practice wisdom and experience. *Relationierung* leads to the emergence of a new hybrid form of professional knowledge (Dewe, 2012).

Professional practice is therefore seen as the capability of social workers to act in heterogeneous contexts, in complex, uncertain situations, in solution-focused ways and based on research evidence (Heiner, 2004). Art is understood as the capability to merge theoretical and research knowledge with experiential and everyday knowledge, while paying regard to professional values in order to enable situated action in professional practice (Moch, 2006). In so doing, professionals need to consider not only the different reference systems, but also the different types of knowledge, as the following figure shows.

Social Work Discipline		Social Work Profession	
System of Reference	<i>Knowledge domains in social work situations</i>	<i>Knowledge domains in social work situations</i>	System of Reference
Focus on ascertaining the truth	<i>Scientific knowledge of social problems</i>	<i>Experiential knowledge</i>	Focus on effectiveness
Necessity of justification	<i>Scientific knowledge of interventions</i>	<i>Organisational and contextual knowledge</i>	Necessity of action
Operates with high levels of abstraction (theories, models, concepts)	<i>Ethical knowledge</i>	<i>Skills Infrastructure and material resources</i>	Operates with low (specific) levels of abstraction (individual cases, specific situations)

**Figure 1:** Reference systems and knowledge domains in social work practice and academia (own illustration)

Whereas in the scientific discipline explanatory knowledge of social problems, of interventions and ethics prevails in the form of research and theories, in the context of practice, experiential, organisational and contextual knowledge, including legal and policy knowledge and practical skills dominate.

The gap between the two systems is not overcome easily, requiring four specific forms of *Relationierung* (Kunz, 2015). First, the various forms of knowledge need to be linked with each other and second, they have to be connected with practice to arrive at what Dewe (2012) calls reflexive professionalism. Practice also involves a wide range of mental and emotional states and processes (Grady & King Keenan, 2014), thus reflexive professionalism includes managing emotions and knowledge skilfully and can only be demonstrated in practice. Practice under conditions of uncertainty, heterogeneity and complexity is 'difficult to script into a prescribed intervention or to plan for a consistent response because it so often depends and relies heavily on the [professionals'] ... judgement' (Grady & King Keenan, 2014, p. 103). Professional judgements need to be made with reference to service users' views and need to be calibrated with shared views on quality of practices of the professional and scientific community. Therefore, Kunz (2015) argues thirdly, that *Relationierung* requires a discourse in these communities. In addition, social work students and newly qualified social workers are faced with a specific form of *Relationierung* (Kunz, 2015) in which

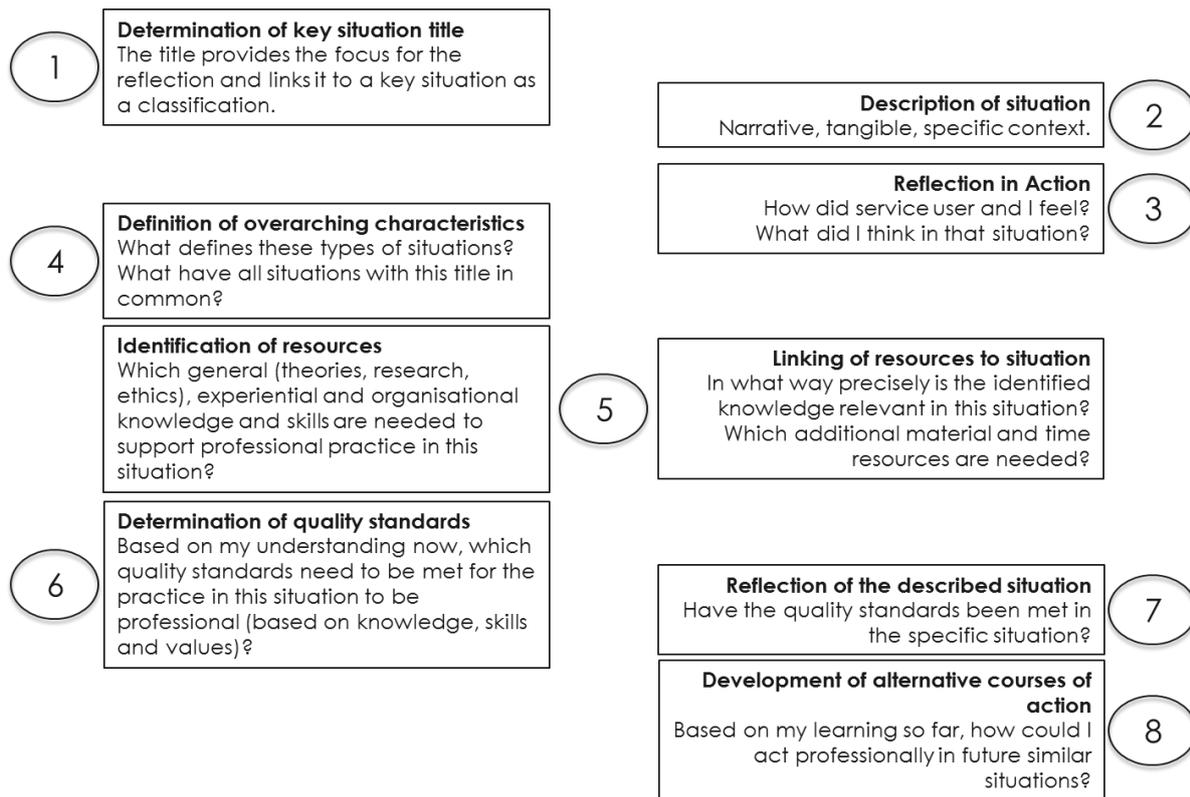
novices have to internalise knowledge, while experienced practitioners and experts need to externalise their implicit knowledge (see Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1982).

The gap between the system of academia and practice can be bridged and the above outlined four types of *Relationierung* can be achieved through dialogic and co-productive learning processes. Such learning is not understood as a one-sided act of imparting knowledge and neither does it infer the recipe like acceptance of instructions. Inherent in the two systems of social work science and profession is the difficulty that scientific knowledge is focused on abstractions and generalisations, while experiential knowledge or practice wisdom is concerned with unique and specific situations. While the former neglects unique deviations from the generalised 'ideal', the latter cannot be subsumed under these generalised ideals, without reducing complexity or distorting their essence.

*Relationierung* of practice, knowledge and values requires, approaching the other field in an open-minded, inquiring way, without giving up awareness of one's own field or selling this short. It means to negotiate quality and demands regard for one's own and the other's perspective, while being aware of differing contexts. Professionalism therefore entails a process of calibration of the systems of practice and academia to develop a merging new field in-between (Tov, et al., 2013).

### **3. The key situation reflection model**

In the key situation reflection process with eight steps knowledge is identified and co-constructed within CoPs. The reflection process combines the generalisable and specific aspects of each situation, thus enabling *Relationierung* and learning. The following figure illustrates the eight processes as they are documented:



**Figure 2:** The key situation reflection process in eight steps (Kunz, 2015, p. 197, adapted and translated by author)

While the documentation of the reflection process is always structured in this order the reflection process starts with an experienced practice situation, which is described (2). The situation is re-enacted in role play whereby the emotion of the social worker and the service user and the thinking (reflection-in-action) of the social worker are elaborated (3). A matching title for the key situation is chosen (one) and the typical characteristics for these types of situations are defined (four). We use the term resources to describe all forms of knowledge as well as values, skills and additional resources required. These are identified in three different ways (five). First, based on the 'reflection-in-action', the 'knowing-in-action' (Schön, 1983) is explicated and can provide access to implicit assumptions or explicit forms of knowledge of the social worker. Second, a brainstorming exercise, listing known theories and research evidence, can lead to an in depth exploration of these. Third, applying a problem based approach, learners develop questions about the situation. This enhances interest of the learner and is motivating. Whichever pathway is chosen, it is important, to not just rely on experiential knowledge, but to engage in literature research to expand perspectives. It is also essential that resources are first described succinctly and clearly and are secondly linked to the situation. Dialogue among learners and with tutors supports the negotiation of the meaning of the resources in relation to the specific situation in order to understand how exactly the knowledge described is related and relevant to that situation. Based on the elaborated knowledge, skills and

values, quality standards are defined (six). This focuses on the criteria by which good (professional) practice is recognised. These are then used to reflect the original situation (seven), allowing an evaluation of whether the quality standards were met in her or his actions. This will lastly, provide clues to possible alternative courses of action (eight). In doing so the reflective cycle is ended by looking forward to future similar situations, in order to identify what could be done differently.

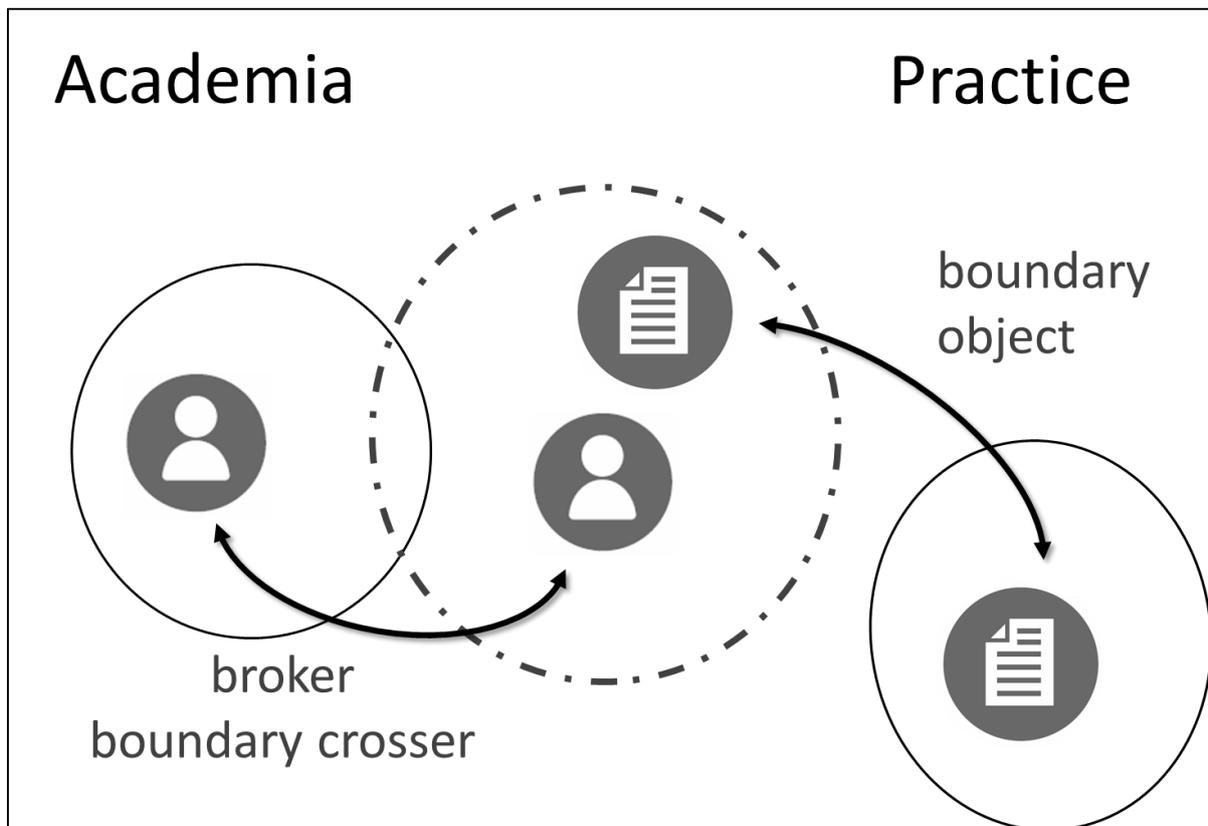
This reflection process is a shared dialogue about the meaning of knowledge practice and ethics, which enables understanding, deep learning and *Relationierung*. The key situation reflection model supports this processes as it requires the person reflecting to continuously think about the generalisable and specific aspects of a situation and this in turn enables internalisation and externalisation of knowledge. Ideally, the reflection process is followed in all eight steps, but it is possible to adapt this. In a practice learning setting, we suggest that it is beneficial if practice educators and students undertake this process together. Practice educators can thereby (re-)discover scientific and theoretical knowledge and the associated language and thus can support students in building links between their explicit knowledge and practice situations, thus supporting the internalisation.

#### **4. Continuous professional development: boundary objects and boundary crossers**

The key situation reflection model is based on various (socio-) constructivist adult learning theories (Tov et al., 2013). One of the main influences is the social theory of learning by Wenger (1998). His analysis of learning provides a useful perspective on the synthesis of and relationship between theory and practice and knowing and doing (Tov et al., 2015; Staempfli, et al., 2012). Wenger (1998) emphasises the interdependence of actions and knowledge and states that learning occurs in negotiation of meaning. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) argue that in negotiating meaning there are likely to be conflicts. These can be resolved either in an integration-oriented or a conflict-oriented manner. Reimann and Zumbach (2001) suggest that the latter is preferable, as different perspectives and voices are heard and not overseen and that diversity of views is conducive to in-depth learning and the development of shared understandings. There is a clear tension between the different perspectives as prerequisites for the design of CoPs on the one hand and the potential for conflict within CoPs. This has to be managed and supported to promote learning in anti-oppressive and open ways, including addressing conflicts.

In the above described reflection process members of a CoP co-produce situated understandings and meanings which may remain inaccessible to others outside of that CoP. Wenger (1998) argues that negotiation of meaning therefore creates boundaries, which in this understanding are not between

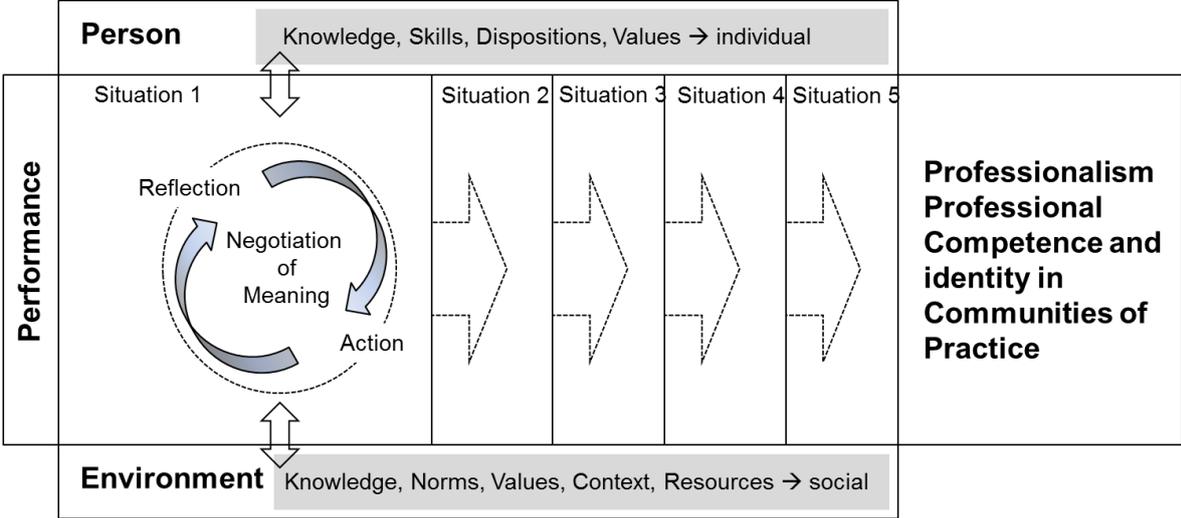
practice and science, as discussed earlier, but around and between each CoP, irrespective of its setting. Negotiation of meaning produces locally shared understandings in the form of reifications. Wenger (1998, p 58) defines reifications as congealed meanings such as abstractions, tools, symbols, stories or concepts, which we "perceive ... as existing in the world, as having a reality of their own". Reifications are in this sense 'boundary objects' (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) and can as products and co-creative processes help to transcend boundaries. Similarly, people can bridge boundaries by acting as mediators and as 'brokers, boundary crossers, and boundary workers' (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 138).



**Figure 3:** Boundaries and boundary crossing between CoPs (Stämpfli, Kunz & Tov, 2014, p. 248, based on Wenger, 1998, p. 105, author's translation)

Figure 3 shows our interpretation of key situations as reifications and boundary objects and those engaged in the reflection process in a CoP as boundary crossers, who cross the boundary of their reflection CoP into practice (learning) setting and back again. While key situations cannot simply be 'used' in (another) practice, they can be the starting point in a renewed process of learning and boundary crossers contribute to this in reflection and discourse.

We hypothesise that these boundary crossers, as they engage in renewed learning processes, develop their professionalism, professional knowledge, values and capability and thus continuously adapt their professional identity in CoPs. The following figure depicts this ongoing development as an interplay and interaction of reflection and action between the person and social environment of the CoP.



**Figure 4:** Continuous Professional Development of Capability (Tov, et al., 2013, p. 34, author’s translation)

Situated knowledge, that is to say knowledge memorised and internalised within a specific context or in relation to a situation, is the most dominant form of knowledge (Kaiser, 2005). It can be more easily accessed in practice situations. We therefore hypothesise further, that the knowledge co-produced in the key situation reflection process in a CoP is memorised in the context of that situation and is thus recalled through association more easily in a similar practice situation. This flexible approach to CPD and learning at all career stages, in our mind, could further foster the kind of leaning culture Munro (2011) and the Social Work Reform Board (2011) are seeing as essential to overcome the managerial, technocratic approaches so prevalent in social work organisations.

In designing the CoPs in the #keysituation project we were guided by our understanding of reflection, continuous professional development and design principles for CoPs. In the following sections we will first describe the principles and then discuss how we have applied them in the #keysituation project.

**5. CoP design principles**

We synthesised design principles found in the literature and arrived at the following nine. Wenger et al. (2002) originally described the first seven design principles for CoPs. These have been validated

and extended (eight) by North et al. (2004), while Probst and Borzillo's (2008) research developed indicators for successful CoPs (nine). These findings offer a helpful orientation in the process of community building and management.

1. Focus the design on evolution and on development. CoPs are organic entities, which are affected by learning and thus, are continually engaged in a reflexive change (Wenger et al., 2002). For this reason, a rigid goal orientation is counterproductive.
2. Facilitate a dialogue between internal and external perspectives. Successful communication design brings 'information from outside the community into the dialogue' of a CoP (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). This dialogue is significantly influenced by an open attitude towards the competencies of fellow members. If these are missing and diverse skills and perspectives are not recognized, then there is a great risk that the CoP will fail (Probst & Borzillo, 2008). Over and above internal connections it is important to 'promote access to other intra- and inter-organisational networks' (Probst & Borzillo, 2008, 341).
3. Invite members to participate at various levels. Wenger et al.'s (2002) research of CoPs found various forms of belonging. At the heart of the community is the core group (10 to 15% of all members), surrounded by an active group (15 to 20%) and peripheral members (65 to 75%). The involvement changes constantly. Levels of participation appear to be affected by clear objectives, as they help to clarify responsibilities and enhance motivation to participate more actively (Probst & Borzillo, 2008). On the outside of a CoP interested third parties, although not actively participating, follow the activities of the community. As participation is voluntary, motivating people to participate is helpful. This may also be necessary if potential participants are hesitant to actively contribute their knowledge, as reluctance to participate is linked to anxiety in relation to self-exposure (Ardichvili, Page & Wentling, 2003).
4. Create both public and private meeting spaces. A community thrives on social relationships that connect its members. These are formed in shared activities around the domain but equally important are informal aspects (Wenger, et al., 2002) and a lack of direct interaction between members is an indication of a CoP that is failing (Probst & Borzillo, 2008). A CoP should also offer an environment in which trust and testing out ideas without any repercussions is possible, 'thus requiring a strong degree of safety and intimacy between members' (Probst & Borzillo, 2008, p. 344).
5. Focus the design of the community on its benefits and the domain. CoPs develop and stay alive, when they are useful for its members (Probst & Borzillo, 2008) and have a clear objective (Hennessy & Anderson, 2013). The benefits need not be clear from the beginning and can evolve over time. It is important to recognise that learning is enhanced when CoP members appreciate their participation and, a CoP in turn values individual members (Wenger, 1998).

6. Combine familiar with stimulating activities. Routine activities are stabilising and have a positive effect on forming and maintaining relationships and shared repertoires. Stimulating and exciting endeavours in contrast open new perspectives and allow CoP members to imagine new avenues to pursue (Wenger, 1998). Both must be present in the right amount, so that a CoP develops.
7. Create a rhythm for the CoP. In the course of its life, a CoP passes through various stages from potential - coalescing - maturing - stewardship to transformation (Wenger et al., 2002). Regular meetings help to strengthen ties among members and promote participation, shared practices and understandings.
8. Provide every CoP with a community gardener. North et al. (2004) came to the conclusion that well-functioning CoPs need a person that keeps the group together with commitment and charisma, gains new members and supports building of trust and relationships. Probst & Borzillo (2008, p. 340) also see their role as 'best practice control agents' and based on their research, encourage the designation of 'leadership roles to motivate community members to collaborate' (p. 344) by making the CoP attractive and by supporting the structure around (sub-)domains.
9. Support members and the CoP as a whole through sponsorship. Probst and Borzillo (2008) concluded that it is vital that CoPs are supported by senior management to guarantee necessary resources for participation. Sponsors need to be kept informed of the work undertaken and the value of the CoP, which is supported by the development of evaluative measures. They developed a governance model for CoPs, which includes governance committees.

While these principles are valid for both local as well as geographically distributed CoPs, distributed CoPs face specific challenges. In these, issues relating to distance, diversity, culture and language are more complex and thus members of these need to 'devote much more time to reconciling multiple agendas in order to define the domain and to building personal relationships and trust between members.' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 120).

The literature shows the complexities, which have to be considered in the design of CoPs. These research findings point to diverse opportunities and challenges that arise when trying to bring together diverse perspectives, but they all relate to a balancing of the three key constituents domain, community and practice.

#### **6. The #keysituation project: discourse on professional practice in CoPs on a virtual platform**

Social work has a long history of reflecting on cases and situations, the knowledge generated however, is rarely documented. As part of the #keysituation project (2014 – 2016) we have set up a virtual platform, on which key situations are published and made accessible for discourse in the

professional and scientific communities. We paid equal attention to technical aspects and social interactions as a focus on technology alone is insufficient (Jang, 2013). Our aims are to develop an open learning culture, to enable sharing of situated knowledge and to expand the knowledge base in social work. The platform thus offers an innovative concept for situated knowledge management.

Our own research as part of the project has shown that the titles of the key situations are easily understood by practitioners and academics alike (publication pending). We suggest that the titles of situations offer a promising knowledge categorisation, a practice based situated classification of the various form of knowledge, which forms the basis for dialogue and discourse on the quality of social work practice, knowledge and values in the profession.

We have used an e-learning platform since 2009 and our evaluation of its content has shown that the reflections produced by students are of varying quality (Tov et al., 2013). Therefore, as part of the current project we have formed a number of thematic CoPs who are quality assuring and reviewing the published situations. Their task is to review, complete, expand and create key situations. These CoPs are composed of representatives from both academia and practice. *Relationierung* therefore, occurs not only with regard to the content of the reflections (domain), but also in terms of membership (community) and diverse perspectives from the realm of academia and practice.

In designing these CoPs we were mindful of the discussed design principles (see page xxx). First, to enable evolution and development, we approached the formation of the CoPs in a flexible manner, allowing for continued adaption of their domains and membership. Flexibility and the user experience is also at the centre of the evolving design of the platform and of additional IT tools. Second, we have encouraged diverse membership (from academia and practice and from different German speaking countries), thus facilitating dialogue between diverse perspectives. Third, paying attention to various levels of participation, we have initially established the core of active members. In order to enable the formation and commitment we have made personal contact with interested people and supported them in clarifying their resources and motivations. We have asked members to commit to a two to three year-long participation. This has supported the transition at the end of the project. We have founded an association (Network Key Situations in Social Work), which has a number of individual and corporate members. We have opened the platform in March 2016 to the German speaking social work community and at the time of writing over 400 users have registered. Fourth, when choosing the platform software, we ensured that personal as well as public communication is possible and that personal profiles can be made. Fifth, as CoP members' interest and passion for the domain is central to realising the benefits of participation, therefore we formed

the CoPs around self-chosen topics. This also ensures that expertise flows into each domain. The vision of the envisaged benefits was the driving force in the early project stages. Over time CoP members have started to experience the benefits of co-producing and sharing knowledge as they were working on specific key situations in their domain. The interdependence between benefits and flexibility is the basis for the innovative potential inherent in CoPs. Although we initially only planned to set up thematic CoPs, when interested practitioners and academics expressed a wish to form CoPs with a focus on the reflection model itself and its use in diverse settings, we welcomed this. These CoPs are now developing the model to fit in with organisational needs in relation to CPD and quality assurance, and have adapted the model for use in supervision, peer led intervision and practice education. Sixth, in the initial stages of the project many aspects were unfamiliar. We therefore focussed in the first phase on building trust and relationships. The challenge in such a flexible endeavour is to offer orientation. We have addressed this by documenting the process, the expectations and the benefits clearly. Seventh, creating a rhythm for the CoP members and supporting the growth and development of the distributed CoPs was another challenge. In addition to the focus on relationship building we have developed and communicated a clear vision (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-d0PzmxQM7c>). To support coalescing, we have organised five face to face network events and hold additional virtual meetings regularly. In the future we envisage to organise a yearly conference where all network members can come together. Eighth, every CoP has one or two coordinators who are supported in fulfilling these roles by the project team. These act as community gardeners and help to cultivate each CoP. Lastly, to enhance sponsorship from the organisations in which the members are employed, the project team offered support in negotiating resources for interested members to participate. Gaining the support from sponsors or line managers was the biggest challenge. Members are either using their own CPD time or are being given time by their employer.

The various CoPs are part of a wider network of practice (Brown & Duguid, 2000) which is made up of all those who share a common professional background and who can have access to the key situation platform. At present, 10 CoPs have formed and altogether over 35 active members are engaged. We have not yet reached critical mass in numbers and are clear that the CoPs will only flourish, if participation is beneficial for its members and the whole key situation network. The association together has overall responsibility for the development of the platform and the CoPs. Its board together with the CoP coordinators meets regularly and has formed the Key CoP as a core steering group. This ensures a participatory approach to decision making, which is focussed on the needs of the CoPs and, enhances the flow of information as well as the strengthening of personal relationships.

Besides these activities we offer training sessions on topics such as CoPs, IT tools and we are coaching the CoP coordinators. In addition, we organise virtual meetings and webinars, responding to the needs of the dispersed nature of the project team (Switzerland, Israel and England) and the CoPs (Switzerland, Germany, Luxembourg). We are also devising business plans to secure a sustainable future for both the association and the platform and are planning further research and development project. We are interested in developing open educational resources and in evaluating the implementation of the model in various settings.

The English platform and website is currently under construction and once opened, will continually be expanded with the contributions of those working with the key situation model in seminars and in organisations. The platform can then be used by practice organisations for practice education, CPD, peer led intervision or simply as knowledge depository and by universities for reflection seminars. Key situation network members can access key situations on the platform, participate in discussions, make comments on existing situations, make additions to the individual elements or upload new key situations themselves. We envisage that the reflection model and the platform will have various benefits:

- \* Social work organisations can use the key situations model for the purpose of quality assurance, knowledge management and CPD.
- \* Practice educators can use the platform and the reflection model in their work with social work students.
- \* Researchers can disseminate their research findings by documenting and referring to relevant findings in relation to key situations on the platform.
- \* Supervisors in social work can make use of the reflection model for supervision.
- \* For students key situations are a training ground to integrate theory and practice and they can gain an overview of the whole social work field.
- \* The profession can use the platform as a practice based, situated knowledge management system, which is flexible thus allowing new policies and laws to be integrated.

## **7. Conclusion and outlook**

Overall, the key situation model, the platform, our website ([www.schluesselsituationen.ch](http://www.schluesselsituationen.ch)) and the key situations network bridge academia and practice. Researchers are enabled to consider the relevance of their work in relation to practice situations, while professionals are encouraged to widen their horizon by looking to diverse forms of knowledge.

Reflection and discourse aim to develop and enhance individual and shared knowledge and expertise. This requires a culture of openness towards one's own knowing and not knowing, which takes courage, especially when this is published on a platform. The creation of a climate of trust in which CoP members value each other and are able to communicate on an equal footing is of utmost importance. This assumes that experiential knowledge and scientific knowledge are given equal importance. A common language must be found and mutual understanding developed (Tov et al., 2015). On this basis the generated knowledge can be seen as a shared asset that belongs to everyone and anyone. It is a means to an end, to ultimately enhance practice with service users and outcomes for them.

If successful, it will change the people in the CoPs and thereby, has the potential to influence other groups to which these members belong. We envisage that if the platform and network is perceived as useful and starts to grow, we will include service users to contribute to the reflections and discourse on social work situations. It is their perspective and expertise, which is at present not considered enough in German and Swiss social work education and practice.

We hope that the model offers inspiring outlooks on reflection, discourse and knowledge management to support professionalism in social work. While our model is strongly based on theories, we make hypothesis, which will need further exploration. Research questions, which would need to be explored are for example: What is the impact of the reflection model on the thinking and doing of practitioners and on the outcomes for those who use social work services? Is the knowledge co-produced in the key situation reflection process in a CoP recalled better in practice?

The model has been tried and tested in Switzerland and is now being used in several German speaking universities as part of qualifying social work education and in practice organisations. A recent pilot as part of an ASYE programme saw its first implementation in England. As part of the main authors PhD project key situations in English social work will be developed to support adaption of the model in England further.

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