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Nurturing Social Learning Spaces to Enhance Women in Sport Leadership Programs

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Community of Practice (CoP) was first brought to *Journal* readers in the April 2017 article entitled “[Social Learning Spaces in Support of Women Coaches in University Sport](#)”. CoP founder Etienne Wenger-Trayner wrote that “the formation of a community creates a social space in which participants can discover and further a learning partnership related to a common domain ... The key characteristic is the blending of individual and collective learning in the development of a shared practice.” Since then, CoPs have engendered a multitude of powerful positives for coaches and sport organizations: enjoyment, connecting, sharing, bonding, motivation, and creativity, all in a safe environment and all essential elements of a productive and successful coaching career.

Now, Diane Culver, Erin Kraft, and Isabelle Cayer provide *Journal* readers with a concrete example of a CoP in action, the Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact Program (AWiSL). Made possible through a grant from the federal program, WAGE (Women and Gender Equality) the AWiSL consists of 12 provincial sport leaders, five social learning mentors, and the overall project lead.

Based on numerous interactions with the AWiSL, Culver, Kraft, and Cayer introduce its inner workings and describe practical examples of how to frame, facilitate, and assess a CoP and its initiatives geared, in this case, towards increasing gender equity and leadership diversity.- Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor

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By Diane M. Culver, Erin Kraft, and Isabelle Cayer

Social learning spaces are “places of genuine encounters among learners where they can engage their experience of practice.” CoPs, arguably the most well-known form of social learning spaces, are “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis.” Over the past few decades, CoPs have been well documented as a valuable model to promote learning and development for coaches, female-only groups. In a CoP, the learning curriculum is driven by the members’ learning needs.

A case in point is the Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact (AWiSL) program, a collaborative CoP project between the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) and various Alberta sport organizations. With this article, we provide insight into a government-funded social learning initiative aimed to increase gender equity and leadership diversity across Alberta.

The former Alberta Sport Connection asked provincial sport organizations (PSO) and others to indicate their interest in conducting a project within their organization based on the AWiSL goals. The province provided a small amount of funding to each PSO. The balance came through the CAC from the federal government body now called WAGE (Women and Gender Equality Canada).

Twelve sport organizations took part in the AWiSL. Each designated a project lead (sport leader) to be a member of the AWiSL CoP. These included executive directors, board members, and program coordinators from organizations such as Hockey Alberta, Fast & Female, and the Wapiti Nordic Bike Club. The other members were the CAC project lead, Isabelle Cayer, CAC’s Director, Sport Safety, and five mentors who acted as social learning leaders for the sport leaders. In line with the CoP theory, the community members participated in activities to identify and address their learning needs through monthly meetings either online or in person. These activities included workshops around bias in the workplace, time management, and attracting sponsors/funding. For information about the project’s vision, mission, and purpose, visit <https://coach.ca/alberta-women-sport-leadership-impact-program>.

Note: A social learning leader nurtures a social learning space by facilitating ongoing learning activities and interactions in support of individual and collective learning.

Creating Strategic Alignment

Once the CoP membership was determined, strategic alignment was created between the CoP members and their home sport organizations. For some, the sport organization's support played an important role in their capacity to transfer their learnings from the CoP to create changes for women and girls. However, in some cases, a considerable barrier was erected if, for instance, the sport organization did not see the value in the changes the sport leader wanted to make. One sport organization committed to financially supporting a project focused on creating mentorship opportunities for women. However, this commitment was not fulfilled, and the funding was tabled for a future meeting, leaving the sport leader without this valuable resource as well as the feeling that her project was not deemed a priority by her organization. We recommend using the Value Creation Framework (VCF) templates (to be further discussed) to collect stories from CoP members and sport organizations early on to ensure that goals and values align. If they do not, it may be a good opportunity to start a conversation about the importance of empowering women in sport. As the literature demonstrates, sport organizations and those in leadership positions play an important role, either as a support or a barrier in terms of moving women forward in coaching and leadership. Thus, having these conversations is significant for the transfer of knowledge and the potential impacts of social learning.

Cayer first set out to develop a CoP with the female and male allies involved; however, her initiative evolved into a Landscape of Practice (LoP). LoPs consist of "a complex system of communities of practice and the boundaries between them", including the networks of the various people in the broader practice landscape. Through the opportunities she set up to interact with the greater sport community, the AWiSL expanded to involve in its execution several stakeholders who were not core members of the initial CoP. As such, WAGE, the CAC, Alberta Sport Connection, the provincial multi-sport organization, and various clubs played an important role in supporting the allies through resources including but not limited to financial ones. For example, Alberta Sport Connection included the CoP members in their annual conference by providing a panel presentation opportunity, funding support for each project, and sending a representative to the in-person workshops.

Of equal importance, these other organizations were instrumental in disseminating knowledge from the CoP to the greater sport LoP. For example, one organization's policy ensures certified women coaches are on all-female teams. During the CoP meetings, this sport organization's leader introduced the policy to a second sport leader who shared it with her sport organization, which supported her in making the changes necessary for its implementation. Without the buy-in and support of the second leader's organization, this change may not have been possible.

Evaluating the Impact of the CoP

In order to ensure that value was being created for those involved, we were asked to conduct an evaluation of this CoP/LoP. We used the Value Creation Framework (VCF) developed by Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner and their colleagues.

The VCF is used to frame social learning initiatives, and to assess the perceived learning value (positive or negative) of participating in a social learning space such as a CoP or LoP. As we were not involved in the initial framing of the project, our focus was on assessment. The VCF encourages community members to share their stories to show the value of their participation and to link the activities of the social learning space and the eventual learning outcomes (personal and organizational). In our evaluation, we have been collecting stories from the CoP members specifically asking them how their experiences in this CoP had an impact on their personal and professional lives. During the interviews, we have been using value creation story templates (see Appendix A) and a series of questions informed by the VCF. Examples of questions include:

- Has your participation in the community led to any changes in your professional practice/organization? Describe.
- Has your participation in the community changed what you do (your role) and/or how well you do it? Examples.
- Did your participation in the CoP allow you to make any connections with stakeholders you may not have otherwise had access to?
- Did you engage in any memorable conversations/interactions with others from the CoP which may have affected your leadership development? Describe.

The VCF proposes the collection of various forms of data related to organizational outcomes such as, in our project, the number of women participating in women-only programs for coaches. By linking these ‘effect’ data pieces with the value creation stories of the CoP participants, one can document the learning value of participating in a social learning space. For additional resources and access to the VCF document, visit <https://wenger-trayner.com/>

Framing and Facilitating a Social Learning Space

Through our investigation, we have begun to develop an evidence-based how-to model for organizations wishing to implement a similar intervention to support women coaches and leaders. After listening to the CoP members’ stories and Cayer’s experience as facilitator, we consolidated our understandings of what worked and what did not, so that we may recommend steps for future iterations of this type of initiative. For example, in addressing the CoP members’ learning needs, we found that many appreciated learning in a semi-formal environment such as participating in a workshop to develop presentation skills. Engaging in informal activities was seemingly just as effective. An important first step is deliberately establishing a trusting environment in the CoP, from the first meeting. In considering such an initiative, plan for a face-to face meeting to start the CoP activities. Schedule social time for participants to get to know each other. During subsequent meetings, facilitate CoP activities online and/or in-person depending on location and the community members’ needs.

Online gatherings may minimize costs and enable more consistent participation from group members. As well, we suggest planning deliberate opportunities for informal sharing to meet the members’ needs and to tap into the full potential of social learning. This

could be as simple as including a dinner after a face-to-face meeting. CoP members need to feel comfortable with each other if they are going to be open to sharing their experiences and challenges and ensuring that the group makes suggestions for overcoming these challenges rather than being judgemental. In Alberta, CoP members noted how much the establishment of trust contributed to their feeling safe to share their challenges.

Another key activity in framing this CoP was dividing the mentors and sport leaders into pods. Each mentor facilitated regular, small group meetings of three to four sport leaders in addition to the large group meetings. The mentors participated in a workshop with the CoP social learning theorists, Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, in preparation for their social learning leadership roles. Several sport leaders found that these pod meetings and more individualized discussions created a sense of accountability to move forward with their projects and appreciated having access to a mentor for seeking advice and engaging in problem solving.

A final effective framing example was Cayer's deliberate facilitation of knowledge transfer opportunities, which she created for the CoP members to share their goals, experiences, and stories at events such as the 2019 Canada Games and 2019 Alberta Sport Leadership Conference. These opportunities enabled members to share their learning beyond the CoP and engage with the greater sport LoP. As noted above, the CoP activities were always up for negotiation based on the growing and changing needs of the members. For example, one activity aimed at improving the presentation skills of the sport leaders. By continuously collecting stories and experiences through interviews or emails, the social learning leaders ensure that CoP activities are reflecting the individual and collective needs of its members.

Stories Assessing the Impact of the CoP

We now provide examples of data taken from the CoP members' stories. This data supports our assessment of the main project outcomes which are to increase gender equity, leadership diversity/development, and knowledge transfer. Such data are further strengthened when including changes that have occurred in a sport organization. For example, a sport organization implements a policy to have a woman coach on the bench for all female games. After implementing this policy, the organization may collect data on the number of women coaches now registered. According to Wenger-Trayner and colleagues, the community member's story shows *contribution* data, while the numbers showing the increase in women coaches registered with teams demonstrates *effect* data.

Examples of data

Gender Equity:

- Higher number of women in coach developer training, women-only clinics, and mentorship programs. Approximately 50 women and girls have participated in these programs.

Sport leader quote:

And that [running a female-only referee course] also led to other things like we did an all-female entry-level course. This is kind of cool actually, so we did that, and we had 45 new referees and that's kind of a direct result of this [project]. People want this, like we need to expand this; so that's been a direct, I think, result of this project and that's going to continue. We're doing that again in the spring, an all-female certification course. And another really cool thing has been that our referee development officer has decided that next year he wants to do an all-female regional course. So that's an upgrade course for referees, and he is confident that there's never been an all-female regional level of course.

Leadership Development/Diversity:

- Women taking on new coaching roles
- Sport leaders becoming the point of contact for gender equity-related issues in their organizations
- Sport leaders becoming more assertive in their communication

Sport leader quote:

When there are other people who are negative or not supportive [of the project], I think it's made me more confident in...I don't want to say not caring what people think because I care what people think, but I'm not letting it affect me so much. And I just really learned that if I just follow my path, like follow what I think is right, that it benefits of the people around me. So, for sure confidence in that respect, but I would say probably more confident in my communication, like I feel like I can communicate. You know now that I'm thinking, I think that I was able to connect the dots, it just feels easier and the information flows easier for me now than it did before the CoP.

Knowledge Transfer:

- Presenting at various conferences such as Alberta Sport Leadership, Global Coaching Conference, North American Coach Development Summit, Canada Games, Canadian Sport for Life Summit
- Transferring knowledge from in-person professional development meetings to other sectors of the Canadian sport system, including 66 National Sport Organizations and 13 Provincial/Territorial Sport Coaching Partners to support the advancement of gender equity
- Participating in a CoP with the WAGE community. Through this connection, Cayer has recruited expertise from WAGE to collaborate with her on other projects geared towards empowering women, including gender-based violence in sport.

Sport leader quote:

We had a presentation on unconscious bias [during a CoP meeting] and that led to us having a presentation on unconscious bias at an annual general meeting, like at a member meeting. So, that was a real eye opener, I think, for a lot of our membership. So just that concept that unconscious bias is actually a reality. I think that that was something that came directly [from the CoP] that had a good impact, a positive impact on our membership.

Perceived Value:

- Connecting with other women. Partnership developed between two sports to host an annual Women in Sport Leadership conference

Sport leader quote:

Well, I think one of the things that happened is that we really took a step towards collaborating. That was a first time for us; we collaborated with [another sport organization] at our [Women in Sport Leadership] conference... I see that kind of growing because it sparked some interest in some of the other leaders who were asking about how can we get in on that action and kind of join forces. So that was a really cool kind of development. I think we had thought about it here and there but that really [the CoP] kind of helped facilitate it. So that was a real positive and I think that will continue for sure.

Conclusion

This article aims to provide insight into a government-funded social learning initiative to increase gender equity and leadership diversity across Alberta sport. We hope these practical examples of how to frame, facilitate, and assess a social learning space will inspire sport organizations to implement a similar initiative. Considering that the literature has examined gender bias for over 20 years, it is a concern that significant barriers continue to exist for women in leadership across sport. Our evaluation of the collaborative efforts between female and male allies in the AWiSL has had considerable impact across Alberta sport on all levels. From women's-only clinics for new officials to new policy developments for women, the ripple of this initiative has been far and wide. This landscape effect is important because we know that barriers and facilitators for women leaders to participate exist at multiple levels of the sport system. We recommend iterations of this type of project to continue creating tangible, long-term change for women across Canadian sport.

About the Authors

Diane Culver is an Associate Professor in the School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa. Her research interests include coach development and qualitative research. She is currently funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to research parasport coaching, and women in sport organizations. In her teaching, research, and consulting, she is particularly interested in social learning theory and building social learning capability in sport. Diane is also an alpine ski coach who has worked with all levels of skiers from youth to Olympic levels. She now coaches masters skiers and mentors youth coaches.

Erin Kraft is a doctoral candidate in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. As a former swim coach with over 10 years of experience, Erin primarily coached children with developmental disabilities. She holds a master's in education where she examined coaches' experiences teaching children with Autism Spectrum Disorders in aquatic programs. More recently, Erin's research interests have shifted and focus on developing social learning spaces as an approach to facilitate learning opportunities in sport. Her doctoral research uses these social learning spaces to increase gender equity and leadership diversity across sport, and to expand the learning capabilities of Canadian parasport coaches.

Isabelle Cayer is the project lead for the Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact Program. She is the Director, Sport Safety at the CAC and provides leadership and expertise in the areas of Safe Sport, Professional Coaching, and the Responsible Coaching Movement. She has led the development of programs including Women in Coaching mentorship and apprenticeship, research, and policy work, and raised awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion within the sport community in Canada. A former NCCP certified figure skating coach for over 10 years, she currently contributes to coach development as a learning facilitator and Master Coach Developer for the Coaches Association of Ontario, and Women and Leadership Facilitator for Canadian Women and Sport.

References available upon request

Appendix A

Name:

Role or position:

Name:	How participation is changing me as a professional (e.g., skills, attitude, identity, self-confidence, how you feel, e)	How participation is affecting my social connections (e.g., number, quality, frequency, emotions, etc.)	How participation is helping my professional practice (e.g., ideas, insights, material, procedures, etc.)	How participation is changing my ability to influence my world as a professional (voice, contribution, status, recognition, etc.)
Reasons for participation (e.g., challenges, aspirations, professional development goals, meeting people, etc.) +/-				
Activities, outputs, events, networking (e.g., lesson material, discussion, visits, etc.) +/-				
Value to me (e.g., being a better professional, handling difficult situations, Improving organizational performance, etc.) +/-				

Note: +/- Indicates that you can provide positive / negative experience