

BSL Youth Department's approach to Communities of Practice

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The BSL Youth Department's overarching ambition is to inform the systemic reform of education, employment and welfare sectors to ensure they enable the provision of opportunities for young people experiencing disadvantage to participate fully in mainstream social and economic life.

This ambition is based on the recognition that the issues facing young people in transition from school to work in Australia cannot be reduced to individual or familial level factors; they are also consequence of structural issues in the labour market, compounded by institutional level arrangements including the commissioning and governance of key services.

A key part of the way BSL's Youth Department works to achieve this ambition for change is to foster collaboration through the establishment of Communities of Practice (CoPs). This includes multi-sectoral collaboration with a range of service providers working with young people experiencing disadvantage (including education, homelessness, justice, OoHC sectors) and across Departments within local, State and Federal Governments. BSL's non-competitive approach to service delivery and commitment to co-design enables us to work collaboratively across key sectors, while recognising the considerable knowledge, expertise and assets of locally based communities and the value of small organisations in their communities. Through CoPs, BSL also seeks to unite community organisations to work collaboratively on evidencing and implementing effective ways of working, to be a collective voice for change.

BSL currently plays a role as an enabling organisation for a range of CoPs that have different agendas, but which also share common principles and key features, which are outlined later in this paper. Founded on principles of co-production and collaboration rather than competition, BSL facilitates multi-sectoral collaboration and practice reform with a view to fostering innovation through harnessing collective effort, sharing ideas and experimenting with new approaches.

Communities of Practice – what are they and where have they come from

The term 'community of practice' (CoP) was first coined by Lave and Wenger to refer to 'an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities' (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.98). From a social learning angle, CoPs highlight how the socialisation amongst practitioners, and exchange of practice-based expertise and situated knowledge, can generate a shared knowledge base and enhance the potential for innovation. Those who engage in CoPs do so usually with the intention of effecting systemic change and modifying the reality in which they practice (Blackmore 2010). This focus on learning by doing with practitioners, and the regular feed of lessons back into practice also help reducing the gap between research and practice.

Since the inception of the term, CoPs has been adopted by various sectors and to cover a range of kinds of networks. It has a long history in the health and education sectors, as well as in corporate areas. Recently, it has gained currency with government and the community sector, with lots of communities of practice appearing in a range of service and education sectors. The definition of a CoP is broad and encompasses a variety of groups with varying degrees of intentionality in regards to their interaction and what they are trying to achieve. At the most basic level, CoPs can be defined as:

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

(Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015 p.1).

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015, p. 2) define three core elements for the characterisation and development of a CoP:

- **The domain:** It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.
- **The community:** In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other; they care about their standing with each other.
- **The practice:** A community of practice is not merely a community of interest. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

From the literature – ‘lessons learnt’

As CoPs increased in popularity¹, especially in the development sector and within business organisations, the motivations driving their establishment and formats have also become more diverse. Multiple expectations around what CoPs could deliver, and lessons from over two decades of experiences, have led to a more cautionary approach, with growing awareness of the importance of design, processes, and governance mechanisms for the success of CoPs.

Key lessons from the literature:

- **Leadership/facilitation** – it is often said that there are no leaders in a ‘true’ community of practice. However, in most CoPs, decisions need to be made, structures put in place and strategic conversations had (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015). While a CoP should be consultative, not all members always see value in being involved in these processes, and it is not always practicable to engage in consultation for the day-to-day running of a CoP.
- **Sharing existing knowledge vs. creating new** – CoPs should not be viewed through the narrow definition of simply sharing existing knowledge. While this is important, CoPs also ‘innovate and solve problems’. They create new expertise, practices and approaches, and ‘develop a collective and strategic voice’ (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015, p. 6).

- **Engagement and participation** – while good facilitation is important to encourage and enable participation in the CoP by members, the level of engagement will ultimately come down to the value that an organisation perceives they will gain through participation. Not everyone has to have the same level of commitment or engagement, however there has to be enough for the CoP to ‘feel alive as an entity’ (Wenger, Trayner and de Laat 2011, p. 11).
- **Conflict in CoPs** – while harmony is important for a CoP, Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2015, p.7) warn against ‘groupthink’ or the silencing of voices. It is most important that ‘differences are discussable and that they contribute to the learning’.
- **Importance of trust** – the work of a CoP is to create an identity around a common ambition or area of learning. To do so, there has to be a collective commitment and sense of trust. Without trust, organisations will not feel comfortable sharing expertise or challenges, and the learning process breaks down.

Sustaining interest and voluntary engagement is a common challenge in CoPs. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) suggest seven design principles to help manage CoPs and foster vitality:

- 1 Design for evolution:** Take into account that interests will change and groups will exercise different levels of influence in the agenda. New members will have an adaptation period to the ‘CoP culture’, but will also introduce changes;
- 2 Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives:** The communication with outsiders/ external stakeholders often helps members see the potential and opportunities for the community, as well as it facilitates knowledge openness/prevent the risk of insularity.
- 3 Invite different levels of participation:** The level of participation of members will vary, with a minority of consistently active members working closer to the coordinator (core team), some active members, and a majority of members who occasionally participate. Involvement of occasional participants may still be secured through events/discussions around targeted issues.
- 4 Develop both public and private community spaces:** Especially with larger, geographically spread communities, the risk of relying only on virtual communication is high. It is important to combine events that allow for relationship building and direct contact (e.g. face-to-face conferences and workshops).

¹ In the national public service, for instance, there are at least eight CoPs formed around practice 8 areas (https://www.finance.gov.au/resource-management/APS_CoP/).

- 5 Focus on value:** Actively create events and activities that are likely to create value, for the members and for the organisations.
- 6 Combine familiarity and excitement:** This is essentially a relationship management principle, which emphasises the importance of balancing the comforting sense of identity and membership, with activities and actions that promote stimulus (e.g. a special event with a guest speaker) and maintain the interest of members.
- 7 Create a rhythm for the community:** The definition of routines and regular events is important to both identity creation and the sense of liveliness.

The value created by CoPs

In assessing the value of CoPs a key challenge is related to the fact that CoPs are dynamic and the value they create often changes in time. Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002, p.59) note that ‘frequently, early value mostly comes from focusing on the current problems and needs of community members. As the community grows, developing a systematic body of knowledge that can be easily accessed becomes more important’.

Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011, pp. 19-21) outline five ‘cycles’ of value creation that CoPs often go through:

- 1 Immediate value: activities and interactions**
At the most basic level, activities and interactions between CoP members can have value in and of themselves. This could include helping a member solve a problem, a useful conversation, a helpful tip, a story about a challenge, or a visit to a site. Collective problem solving and reflection can result in innovative ideas, and often, simply hearing that others are sharing the same challenges can be a source of relief and confidence.
- 2 Potential value: knowledge capital**
There is value in the way that CoP’s create and foster various forms of capital for members. This may include human capital, in terms of new skills, confidence or knowledge; social capital in terms of increased connections within their field, stronger ties that provide greater sources of information and potential for future collaboration; tangible capital in regards to access to resources (documents, tools, websites etc.) that they wouldn’t have otherwise had; and reputational capital in regards to the influence and reach that a collective voice can have as opposed to a single person or organisation.
- 3 Applied value: changes in practice**
Applying these various forms of knowledge capital in different contexts can lead to changes in actions, practice, processes and tools. Applied value involves the way that practice has changed as this capital is leveraged by members.

4 Realised value: performance improvement

Although it could be expected that changes in practice will result in improvements in performance, this is not guaranteed. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the effect of the application of knowledge capital on performance – that is, achieving what matters to stakeholders.

5 Reframing value: redefining success

The last cycle is achieved when the activity/learning of the CoP ‘causes a reconsideration of the learning imperatives and the criteria by which success is defined’ (Wenger, Trayner and de Laat 2011, p. 21). This might include reframing goals, strategies and values, as well as developing new metrics for performance. This value can be realised at the individual, collective, organisational or institutional level.

Based on the notion of social learning loops, it is possible to see the connectivity between various forms of value. For instance, social learning through a CoP can generate an immediate value, but also provides insights and access to resources that would not be available otherwise (potential value). That, in turn, may lead to effective change of practice (applied value) that generates a good outcome (realised value) and which across time, enhances the social impact of a program or service (transformative value). The knowledge obtained throughout, on the other hand, can be incorporated into new cycles of interaction. Interactions with members as well as connections with external stakeholders, and the ability to make a difference through the community, can produce strategic value. Finally, enabling value can be assessed through enhanced capacity to support and facilitate social learning that is considered useful by members.

Collaborative commissioning and governance

The human services landscape has changed dramatically over the past decades. Increased marketization as a result of deeply held neoliberal assumptions about the efficacy of competition and a preference for small government has resulted in:

- An erosion of trust between providers caused by competition, which has resulted in diminished collaboration and information sharing (associated with innovation, cost saving and streamlining).
- The loss of institutional knowledge as a result of smaller community organisations being absorbed into larger ones.
- A reduction in capacity for service development and innovation, evaluation and data collection among community organisations.
- A focus on personal responsibility for individual outcomes (which has come at the expense of longer term systemic change and collaboration directed at systemic reform).

BSL Youth Department believes that commissioning for services that respond to complex social and economic problems must be underpinned by greater, deeper and more diverse forms of collaboration and partnerships – between government, service providers, business and communities – rather than more competition. There is also growing recognition that collaborative, cross-sectoral governance arrangements with a shared goal allow for more effective joined-up policies and services (Wilks et al. 2015; O’Flynn & Alford 2012; Muir et al. 2010). Concerted, multi-sector effort and the sharing of expertise and networks minimises duplication and multiplies the social value produced for every dollar spent. Collaboration built on trust and reciprocity also has the potential to foster innovation in human service delivery by creating opportunities for sharing ideas and experimenting with new approaches.

It has been argued that collaborative modes of governance, while not always suitable for public policies or programs, may be appropriate for innovations that address complex problems and seek broader policy reform (O’Flynn et al. 2014). In particular, third sector organisations have been argued to offer flexibility, creativity and assets for innovation said to be lacking by the present formation of the public sector, while government is argued to offer resources, technology and sustainability (Almog-Bar and Zuchlinski 2014).

There has been a gradual increase in examples both in Australia and overseas of initiatives employing innovative models involving intermediary bodies, which are quite distinct from the role of a typical ‘prime provider’ or ‘lead contractor’ which might primarily manage sub-providers (see for example the Better Futures, Local Solutions initiative and the Commonwealth Communities for Children program in Australia, ‘backbone organisations’ used in Collective Impact approaches, and New Zealand’s Whanau Ora initiative).

BSL Youth Department’s Role and Approach to Communities of Practice

There are three distinguishing features of the BSL Youth Department’s approach to CoPs:

1 Ambition

BSL’s role as an enabling organisation within communities of practice is driven by our ambition to pursue long term, sustainable, systemic change. Our horizon for change is multifocal: to change how services are commissioned and delivered, to promote innovative models and practices, and to challenge structural drivers of inequality. By bringing together research and policy knowledge with expertise in designing and delivering inclusive social programs, collaborative approaches to community sector development, and close work with government, we are able to pursue social transformation at multiple levels: practice reform; systems and sectoral change; and policy change.

2 Intentionality

CoP activity and partners are driven by a shared purpose for achieving systemic change through re-imagining what is possible and through demonstrating alternative approaches. The CoP acts as a mechanism for reform through applying ongoing learning in how multiple sectors, government, and services work together.

3 Deep level of collaboration

BSL’s role in CoPs is to facilitate a collaborative mechanism which enables partners to harness community effort at a local level, with a view to sharing, informing and influencing national level change. This requires partnerships that go beyond information sharing towards a deeper commitment around a shared goal. In a truly collaborative relationship partners are “willing to develop new ways of thinking and behaving, form new types of relationships and be willing to make changes in existing systems of operation and service delivery” (Keast & Mandell, 2014, p.13)

BSL’s role in these CoPs is not to manage other service providers as in a ‘prime provider’ type arrangement, but rather to work as an enabling organisation with a focus on helping to build the capacity of other providers to work more effectively both with each other and with other local agencies and community groups, to strengthen downwards accountability, and to facilitate the development of more effective ways of working.

Specifically, our role in leading these networks involves:

- Establishing and facilitating the activity of the CoPs
- Service development, including testing, refining and documenting implementation of a fidelity model and associated practice and implementation tools such as Practice Guides and delivery resources
- Provision of Training and support through site visits, practice reflections and e-learning modules
- Facilitating regular conferences and meetings
- Research and data analysis through the BSL Research and Policy Centre.

Underpinning principles

BSL Youth Department's CoP approach is underpinned by the following theoretical principles, and include the subsequent key ingredients. These are drawn from the literature and our own practice experience.

- **Capabilities Approach**, developed approximately 20 years ago by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) provides a framework that can shift policy, program and practice that is directed at addressing disadvantage, away from focussing on people's problems or limitations and towards a focus on people's capabilities. This requires the promotion of both internal capabilities, by building individuals' capacities, as well as a focus on structural capabilities; making available external and enabling opportunities and institutional and material conditions required to pursue a life that people value.
- **Collaborative multi-sectoral effort** is required to foster innovative responses to complex social and economic problems and to enable greater leverage of resources and opportunities. This requires investment and collaboration across all levels of government, across sectors (business, community, education, employment, housing and justice) and across service providers, to influence social transformation at multiple levels: practice reform; systems and sectoral change; policy reform and social change.
- **Place** is critical to understanding the geographic dimensions of social and economic disadvantage and the impact of any policy or programmatic response to this disadvantage. Locally based organisations bring specialised local knowledge and complimentary expertise to a CoP and enable locally based knowledge to inform national solutions.
- **An Adaptive and Applied** approach to delivery of services enables continuous improvement processes and transformational change. Sharing and reflecting on data (both research driven, and from practice knowledge), and adapting and refining programs and practices enables a re-imagining what is possible, with a view to transform existing systems and pursue long-term, sustainable change.

Key ingredients

- **Collective Vision Underpinned by Shared Vision:** commitment to demonstrating a collaborative approach to the delivery of services for young people experiencing disadvantage and to sharing ideas, expertise and resources.
- **Using and refining an Advantaged Thinking practice approach:** agreement around testing, developing and refining key features of an articulated model and practice approach that values and invests in young people's capabilities and harnesses the effort of the broader community in developing and aligning effort to provide mainstream opportunities for young people experiencing disadvantage.
- **Facilitative leadership:** rather than directing partners, BSL as an enabling organisation seeks to drive the work by facilitating meaningful contribution and collaboration that enables all partners to build their capacity for local innovation, with national reach.
- **Adequate resourcing and infrastructure:** to facilitate a program of training and support that enables fidelity to a model and practice approach; promotes collaboration, practice reflection, learning and development and allows face to face meetings and forums supported by online platforms.
- **Co-design:** leveraging the complementary expertise of services, government, businesses and communities, as well as drawing on the voices and experiences of young people, to co-create more effective and innovative approaches to enabling young people experiencing disadvantage to thrive.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** embedding rigorous monitoring and evaluation processes in service delivery, to inform practice and ongoing service improvement.
- **Experience delivering services:** provides a deeper understanding of the complexity of service systems and provides a forum for demonstrating alternative approaches.

Communities of Practice led by BSL Youth Department 2013–2019

BSL currently leads, co-leads or enables a number of Communities of Practice at both a Federal and State level. These include:

Project description	BSL's role as an enabling organisation
Federal	
Transition to Work Community of Practice (TtW CoP)	
<p>Purpose Bringing together 11 TtW providers and their partners in 13 regions in every state and territory, in the pursuit of a shared ambition: to develop and demonstrate an alternative response to addressing youth unemployment – one that is premised upon collaborative, multi-sectoral effort rather than competition.</p> <p>The TtW CoP does this by delivering a consistent, locally contextualised service model, sharing learnings and expertise and participating in an action research evaluation undertaken by the BSL's Research and Policy Centre. Collectively the TtW CoP delivers TtW to approximately 3,600 young people per year.</p> <p>Partners 11 TtW Providers from across Australia, Department of Jobs and Small Business, BSL Research and Policy Centre, BSL TtW Providers and Service Development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establishing and managing the TtW CoP ('driving the work')• Service development, including Practice Guides, tools and resources, operational processes and the TtW CoP website• Data collection, collation and analysis across CoP• Training in the service model and practice approach via site visits to organisations, training days, forums and e-learning modules• Facilitating twice yearly CoP conferences• The action research evaluation through the BSL RPC• Ongoing support, guidance and troubleshooting
Foyer Foundation Community of Practice	
<p>Purpose The Foyer Foundation Community of Practice (FF CoP) meets twice a year and brings together accredited Foyers and Foyers undergoing accreditation across Australia to provide a forum:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• to elevate key practice developments, insights and challenges• identify support needs, and• to share and document emerging themes and commonalities in research and practice. <p>Partners Foyer Foundation, BSL Research and Policy Centre and Service Development, Community Service Organisations operating accredited Foyers</p>	<p>BSL works in partnership with the Foyer Foundation and has a key role in the research and service development functions of the CoP. The key roles of the FF CoP are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To share and identify opportunities for innovation and improvement, including potential partnerships.• To ensure that research informs practice and contributes to a cycle of continuous improvement, and that there is rigour to data collection, evaluation and monitoring efforts.• To provide an interface between evaluation, operations and service development functions.• Provide guidance on the development or refinement of tools and resources to support practice and service delivery, and share these amongst CoP members.• Identify and develop opportunities for campaigning for Youth Foyers within the broader service system

State

EFY Foyer Community of Practice (EFY Foyer CoP)**Purpose**

The EFY Foyer CoP provides a mechanism to share, review, improve and refine the delivery of the EFY Foyer model across the three Victorian sites. The CoP works to ensure that the integrity of the model is maintained across sites and that current and proposed practices and approaches are best placed to meet their intended objectives and outcomes.

Partners

Community Service Organisations operating EFY Foyers, local TAFEs, Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Education and Training, Research and Policy Centre and Youth Department Service Development

- Establishing and managing the CoP, including CoP meetings
- Service development, including Practice Guides, tools and resources and the EFYF website
- Training in the service model and practice approach via site visits to organisations, training days and forums
- Continuous improvement and reflective practice through research and evaluation and data monitoring and analysis.
- The longitudinal evaluation through the BSL RPC
- Identify and share advocacy and innovation opportunities

Developing Independence Community of Practice (DI CoP)**Purpose**

The DI CoP brings together practitioners delivering the Certificate I in Developing Independence (DI) across a number of different pilots including in Foyer settings, Youth Justice and community settings and in Out of Home Care settings to ensure young people experiencing disadvantage have better connections and will feel more confident to pursue their goals and aspirations towards ongoing engagement in education and ultimately to sustain an independent livelihood.

Partners

BSL Research and Policy Centre and Youth Department Service Development, 10 community service provider, 7 TAFEs, 1 RTO and the Department of Education.

- Establishing and managing the CoP, including CoP meetings
- Facilitating sharing of practice and implementation learnings
- Documenting Service development learnings and adaptations for different contexts, including Practice Guides, tools and resources and other materials
- Training in the service model and practice approach via site visits to organisations, training days and forums
- Initial guidance and consultation
- Ongoing evaluation informing practice reflection
- Identifying and sharing opportunities for program innovation and practice reform
- Identifying training needs of staff

Better Futures Community of Practice**Purpose**

Working with the Leaving and Post Care sectors, the Better Futures CoP was initially established to bring together the Barwon Area and South Division to share learnings from the trial of new models.

A consolidated model for Leaving and Post Care support, that utilises an Advantaged Thinking practice approach, is now being rolled out state-wide, which will see an expansion of the CoP to include all Better Futures providers, bringing together over 200 practitioners from across the State

Partners

BSL Service Development, DHHS, Better Futures providers state-wide and local Community Services

- Managing the CoP, including CoP meetings
- Facilitating sharing of practice and implementation learnings
- Facilitating collaboration around service development and refinement, including Practice Frameworks, tools and resources and other materials
- Providing training in the Advantaged Thinking practice approach
- Providing initial guidance and consultation around implementation of a fidelity model
- Establishing practice reflection and continuous improvement mechanisms

Brighter Futures**Purpose**

The Brighter Futures Collective Impact Partnership (Brighter Futures) aims to empower young people with an Out-of-Home-Care (OoHC) experience to develop opportunities and connections outside of the service system by leveraging local assets across government, business, services and community. Anchor Inc. is auspicing the Brighter Futures Pilot and working in partnership with BSL to embed an Advantaged Thinking in services working with young people leaving care and within the broader community

Partners

BSL Service Development and Research and Policy Centre, 11 Community Service Organisations, Designated Teachers in 20 x Outer East Secondary Schools

- Establish and manage the CoP, including CoP meetings
- Facilitate sharing of practice and implementation learnings
- Facilitate development and refinement of Practice, Tools and resources
- Provide an interface between evaluation, operations and service development functions;
- Provide training in the Advantaged Thinking practice approach
- Provide initial guidance and support around implementation of a fidelity model
- Establish Practice reflection and continuous improvement mechanisms

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