

# **Building a Vibrant Online Community That Transcends Geographies, Distance, Cultures and Traditions and Leveraging the Expertise and Experience of Partners.**

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GIRLS Inspire is a Commonwealth of Learning (COL) project designed to leverage the power of open and distance learning (ODL) to end the cycle of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and to address other barriers that prevent girls' economic participation. Through the use of ODL, community organisations and institutions in Bangladesh, India, Mozambique, Pakistan and Tanzania are mobilised to provide schooling and skills training to girls and women. With funding from the governments of Canada and Australia, GIRLS Inspire aims to reach some of the world's most vulnerable and hard-to-reach women and girls through technology-enabled learning. To convince girls, community leaders and parents that girls can access education in a safe and gender-friendly environment, institutions' capacity to offer technology-enabled learning need to be strengthened. GIRLS Inspire committed to creating a network through an online community of practice (CoP) as one of the strategies to enhance the capacity of partner organisations. Through this CoP, conscious efforts are made to form a strong network among the partners and other development agencies for knowledge exchange and capacity building that transcends geographies. Using a case study approach, this paper will explore (1) the innovative use of technology to build a vibrant online CoP (2) the factors contributing to partner engagement on the online community and provide (3) evidence on how partner's capacity were enhanced through the CoP on issues such as CEFM, Gender Equality; Monitoring & Evaluation; community engagement; and online strategies for awareness raising. The following data collection methods will be utilised: direct observations, participant observation, interviews and document analysis. It is envisaged that this paper will contribute to sustainable practice of capacity building, as it captures the change taking place over time and varying geographic regions which can be used to measure the progress of this project as envisaged in its theory of change

## **1. Introduction**

GIRLS Inspire committed to creating a network through a community of practice (CoP) as one of the strategies to enhance the capacity of partner organisations. Conscious efforts are made to form a strong network among the partners for knowledge exchange and capacity building that transcends geographies. Using a case study approach, this paper will explore (1) the innovative use of technology to build a vibrant online CoP (2) the factors contributing to partner engagement on the online community and provide (3) evidence on how partner's capacity were enhanced through the CoP on issues such as CEFM, Gender Equality; Monitoring & Evaluation; community engagement; and online strategies for awareness raising.

## **2. Background and overview of Communities of Practice**

### **2.1 What is a community of practice?**

The term "community of practice (CoP)" was coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger when they referred to the communities of practitioners, which newcomers joined, became part of and where they learned the social cultural practices of the community (Culatta, 2015). It has since become associated with knowledge management as people begun to see them as ways to developing social capital, nurturing new knowledge, stimulating innovation or sharing tacit knowledge within an organisation" (Culatta, 2015).

According to Culatta (2015), learning as social participation is a strong focus of Wenger’s work. “The individual is an active participant in the practices of the social communities and the construction of his/her identity through these communities” (Culatta, 2015). While members learn through participation in a CoP, the generation of newer and deeper levels of knowledge through the sum of the group activity is probably more compelling (Bates, 2014).

Communities of practice can be defined as feature and process based. A community that shares practices can be deemed feature-based. Using the example of the Xerox photocopy repairman (Orr, 1990), Hoadley highlights an example of learning which was situated in the context of problem solving. In this innovative learning experience, the repairmen, through the construction and sharing of stories, and through joint problem solving, were able to understand far more about repairing copiers than from the manuals (Hoadley, 2005).

The process of knowledge generation, application and reproduction, in other words, where the communities of practice are groups in which a constant process of legitimate peripheral participation takes place is an example of process-based CoP (Hoadley, 2005). According to Lave and Wenger, “the reproduction of knowledge through the process of joining and identification with the community is the central and defining phenomenon within the CoP” (Hoadley, 2005).

The CoP has the following characteristics which distinguishes it from other groups: the *domain*, provides a common ground which can be referred to as a common purpose or sense of identity; the *community*, creates a social learning environment where interactions can take place and relationships be build; the *practice*, refers to the shared body of knowledge, and repertoire of resources; experience, stories, tools, best practice (Nicholson, 2009).

## 2.2 Role of technology and tools

Technology provides a wide range of tools which can support the community and the practice or both. Literature indicates that there are three areas through which technology can support the CoP; namely, content, process and context (Hoadley, 2005). In the area of content, technology can be used to store and manipulate information. It allows the participants to create, edit, and upload documents in a repository such as Dropbox. Within the area of process it refers to the technology’s ability to scaffold particular tasks. Basecamp or the Calendar feature can assist participants to schedule tasks. The third area, context, can allow to shift the social context of the participant. In this regard technology can allow equal participation due to anonymity, and in contexts where female are not allowed to openly participate in the face to face context, technology can allow equitable participation (Hoadley, 2005).

## 2.3 Why establish a CoP?

One may ask what the value is of CoP for either the member or the organisation. The following table of Wenger provides a summary. This summary can be used as a guideline to assess the value gained by partners.

**Table 1: Reasons to focus on Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2006)**

Why focus on communities of practice?		
	Short-term value	Long-term value
Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help with challenges</li> <li>• Access to expertise</li> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Fun with colleagues</li> <li>• Meaningful work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal development</li> <li>• Reputation</li> <li>• Professional identity</li> <li>• Network</li> <li>• Marketability</li> </ul>
Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem solving</li> <li>• Time saving</li> <li>• Knowledge sharing</li> <li>• Synergies across units</li> <li>• Reuse of resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic capabilities</li> <li>• Keeping abreast</li> <li>• Innovation</li> <li>• Retention of talents</li> <li>• New strategies</li> </ul>

### 3. Community of Practice (CoP) - the GIRLS Inspire Model

3.1 Considering the long- and short- term value for both organisation and members across geographical, cultural and educational boundaries the GIRLS Inspire CoP was established in March 2016. The CoP was not a naturally occurring organisational structure, but it was carefully and intentionally designed to create a social learning environment where the practitioners, involved in the GIRLS Inspire Project could share and learn from the knowledge embedded in their practice through legitimate peripheral participation (Nicholson, 2009).

The author, as the designer of the CoP for GIRLS Inspire followed the “seven principles for cultivating communities of practice” (Wenger et al, 2002).

- *Design for evolution:* The CoP was designed to build on the common purpose of the members. However, the intention was that it should evolve as members become more engaged and conscious of their own learning needs and interests. To this effect, conscious efforts are made by the coordinator by requesting regular feedback and input from the members on what their expectations are. In this way members have a direct influence in the evolution of the CoP as well as their own.
- *Open a dialogue inside and outside perspectives:* Regular communication among insiders provides feedback to the organiser and allows for improvements. The design of the project, by default, makes provision for an external advisory committee who provides feedback in the operations of the GIRLS Inspire community's activities. The suggestions are brought back into the practice and weaved into the activities of the community. One such example was the advice that the CoP should use various members to share their M&E experiences with the rest. While this was already happening, special attention was given to ensure this idea was incorporated in all activities and more experienced members are encouraged to volunteer their sharing of experiences during synchronous sessions as webinars and Skype meetings. Outside perspectives are also invited through various guest presentations which focus on topics which are of interest for the CoP.
- *Invite different levels of participation;* Wenger suggests that since members have different levels of interest, a good design allows for varying degrees of involvement. The GIRLS Inspire CoP has different levels of participation. The main project team is responsible for organising the activities and a core group of members are involved in taking different levels of responsibility. The majority of the community members participate on a peripheral level and outside this group are a few outsiders who are interested in the community. (Nicholson, 2009)
- *Develop both public and private community spaces:* According to Wenger, the key to designing community spaces is to orchestrate activities in both public and private spaces that use the strength of individual relationships to enrich events and use the events to strengthen individual relationships” (Nicholson, 2009). The GIRLS Inspire CoP has developed an excellent strategy where members are using both public and private spaces. The most utilised private space is the Basecamp, which is organised according to different interests within and across countries. The most utilised public spaces are the application of social media as well as the online community which allows members to share information, stories, lesson learned, building their own skills.
- *Focus on value:* “Communities need to create events, activities, and relationships that help their potential value emerge and enable them to discover new ways to harvest it” (Wenger, 2002). GIRLS Inspire created an online community where members share information on current issues and problems collectively shared by all members. This platform is organised in various subgroups where members can look for the specific information they are interested in and value, while allowing them to share information when they are ready.
- *Combine familiarity and excitement:* Regular meetings where members are requested to share their own experiences and ask questions about issues which concerns them allows a protected environment. On a regular basis new items are introduced and individuals from amongst the members are invited to make a ‘guest presentation’. This creates excitement and motivation on the side of the individual while the other members are looking forward to become a leader (Nicholson, 2009).
- *Create rhythm for the community:* Wenger is of the opinion that the “rhythm of the community is the strongest indicator of its vibrancy”. GIRLS Inspire has created a rhythm for its members with the various scheduled and focussed events.

3.2 The GIRLS Inspire model applied the following strategies as was used in the C4P model of communities of practice identified by Hoadley and Kilner (2005), to integrate technology.

- Linking people with others who have similar practices (*Connectivity*): The GIRLS Inspire project makes extensive use of the following platforms to build the Community of practise, namely *Base Camp*, which is an online project management tool as well as *social media, such Facebook, Twitter and Instagram* and the GIRLS Inspire website. Furthermore the project also uses *webinars* to build the capacity of partners within the CoP. Conscious efforts are made to ensure that all the members understand the affordances of social media and use it to learn and create new knowledge.
- Provide a shared repository of information and resources (*Content*): The *website* serves as a one stop for sharing, learning and finding resources. Furthermore the GIRLS Inspire model created a save space within *Basecamp* where all the resources are stored according to the different groupings in the CoP, such as the Steering committee, the M&E focal points, Communication Focal points which members can easily access according to their needs. *Drop box* was also introduced to cater for bigger files such as Videos which could not easily be uploaded in areas with bandwidth challenges.
- Providing tools for discussing with others (*Communication*): Appreciating the importance and value of synchronous discussions for community building, GIRLS Inspire has introduced various video conferencing tools for meetings that accommodate members across geographical boundaries and time zones, such as *Skype, GoToMeeting and Google Chat*.
- Providing awareness in the community of the information context and various resources. (*Context*)The *website* , which has a translate feature , to accommodate various contexts, is used to provide awareness of new publications, links to new resources as well as links to new and relevant reports regarding the interest and context of members (Hoadley and Kilner, 2005).

#### 4. Method

*Methodology*: A combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used. The project uses a web based platform, Fluid survey for data collection in regard the surveys.

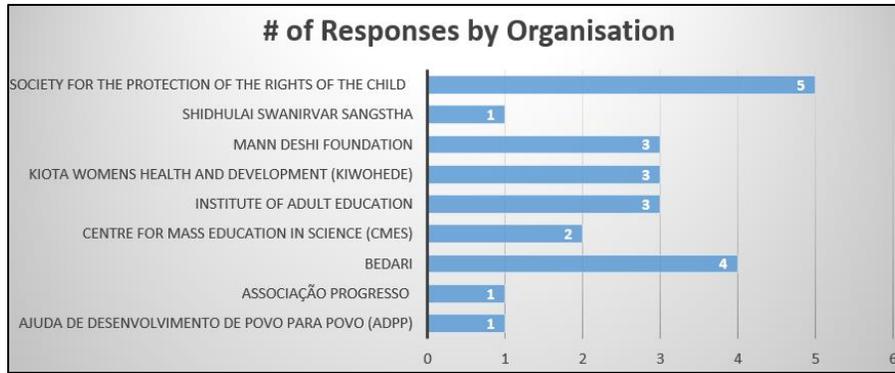
*Sampling and population*: The population for this study was made up of the 80 members of the CoP. Since the population is not that big the interview questions were sent to the 80 members and 23 responses (28.75%) were received.

- *Design*: Direct and participant observations: This method was used to triangulate the data collected through the structured interviews.
- *Interviews*: Using a survey participants were interviewed on various issues as it relates to their use of the CoP, its tools, benefits and new knowledge acquired. The interviews were taking place using the online data collection platform (Fluid Survey) to record it. The questions used in the interview focussed on issues such as : How partner's engagement were enhanced on the online community , which tools they preferred, how they think their capacity were enhanced through the CoP on issues such as CEFM, Gender Equality; Monitoring & Evaluation; community engagement; and online strategies for awareness raising as well as examples of it.
- *Document analysis*: Each partner submitted quarterly reports on FluidSurvey and this data together with the data from the surveys and the data as recorded on Base Camp (emails), social media, such Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and the blog posts in the online website were analysed to form an opinion on the three objectives of the study as listed in the introduction.

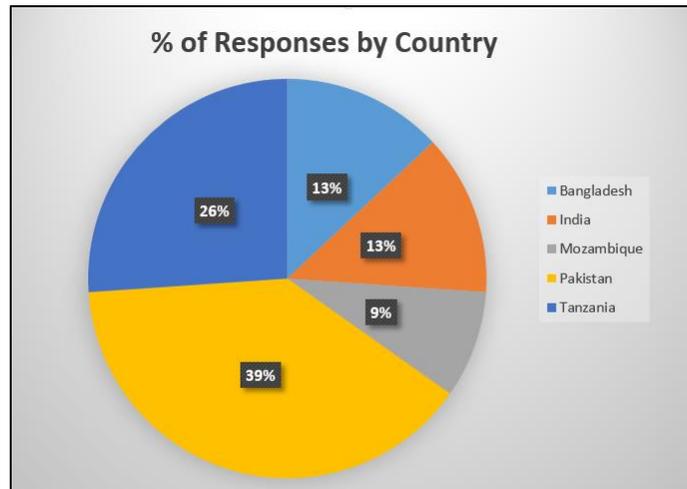
#### 5. Summary of findings

In this section the responses are grouped according to the three areas of investigation namely (1) the innovative use of technology to build a vibrant online CoP (2) factors contributing to partner engagement on the online community and (3) evidence on how partner's capacity were enhanced through the CoP on issues such as CEFM, Gender Equality; Monitoring & Evaluation; community engagement; and online strategies for awareness raising. The bar and pie charts below provide an overview of the respondents who participated in the interviews and their countries of origin. It reflects a representation of the five countries who are part of the GIRLS Inspire CoP.

*Chart 1*



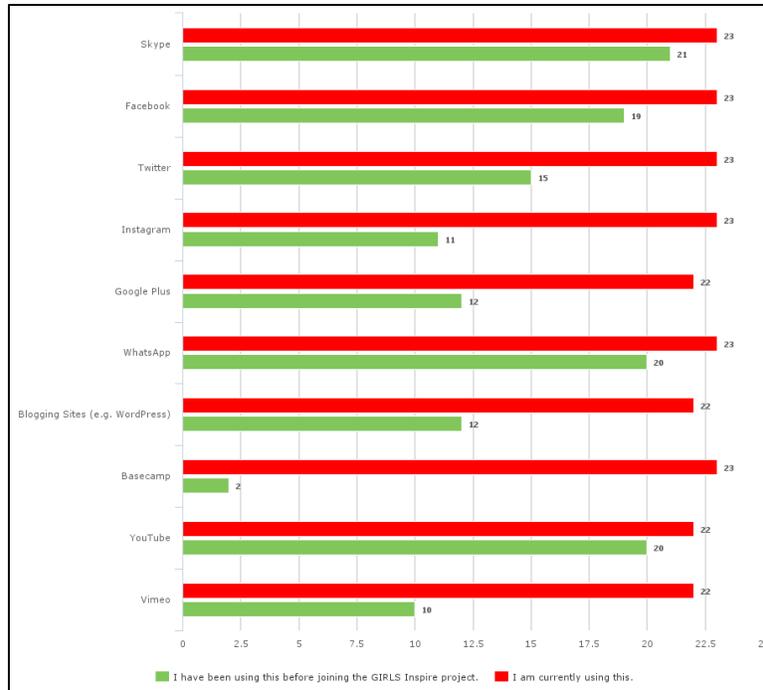
**Chart 2**



## 5.1 The innovative use of technology to build a vibrant online CoP

5.1.1 The following chart indicates members' use of social media before the GIRLS Inspire project and after it started. It is clear that there was a dramatic increase in members' presence on social media since joining the CoP. The findings on this chart were supported with the direct and participant observations as evidenced on social media. This analysis is based on the data from the interviews.

**Chart 3**



5.1.2 When asked what influenced their use of social media there were wide ranging responses.

The majority felt that social media helped them to stay in touch with the whole world, and kept them updated. Getting to know the experiences of similar projects across the world and the fact that it is easy to find like-minded people to share information and knowledge with. The fact that COL project management requires lots of interaction through social media influenced some respondents' motivation and learning to use this medium to highlight their work experiences and achievements. This was confirmed with the observations from the social media of partners as there was an increased use of Facebook and new accounts were opened for twitter and Instagram.

The fact that Social media helps respondents to reconnect and socialize with many people across the world regardless of time and space was a huge advantaged mentioned by a few.

Respondents also commended GIRLS Inspire for providing Guidelines for using social media .According to them the guidelines assisted them to expand their reach on each social media platform. Through the use of social media we can reach a large number of people through just one click was one of the responses. When visiting the various social media sites there was evidence of the increased numbers as well as posts on each partner's site.

In summary, the GIRLS Inspire CoP succeeded in using technology to link members' with each other as highlighted in the above summary. More importantly is the notion among respondents that their use of social media was influenced by their search for information, linking with like-minded people and sharing.

5.2 Partner engagement

5.2.1 What factors contributed to your engagement in the online community?

Table 2

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Email communications		100.0%	23
Engaging online events		82.6%	19
My own interest		60.9%	14
Other, please specify...		26.1%	6
<b>Total Responses</b>			<b>23</b>

Email communication is reported to be the most important factor that contributed 100% to respondents online engagement , followed by engaging online event, 82.6% and own interest 60.9%.The trend as per the findings was confirmed by an analysis of the online events. The majority of the respondents are active in the online communications and very responsive to emails. When asked about other factors they cited ;curiosity and desire to learn; Learning from others and providing instant responses when assistance is required .A few responded that their working position contributed to it and interestingly the motivation and encouragement received from GIRLS Inspire team .

5.2.2 When asked to list the top five new things that they have learned from the online CoP the majority (20) responded that sharing with and learning from the group was the most important new thing that they have learned. This goes hand in hand with their need and appreciation for immediate feedback, discussions, and emails (10) .This response was confirmed with evidence on Basecamp where there was an increase in communication and discussion among members of the various groups. Social Media (10) was also reported as one of the top five new things as well as the use of FluidSurvey and Monitoring & Evaluation (10). The majority of the respondents, were new to M&E and none of them have used Fluid survey before. The Webinars were hosted on GoToMeeting (9) was new to the majority of the respondents and was valued highly. This response was confirmed by the attendance on webinars as well as the participation. Other data which was considered to confirm this response was the post webinar evaluation questionnaires which confirmed respondent’s enhanced capacity and appreciation. The findings indicate that amongst the respondents,86.9% listed sharing and learning from the group as the top new thing they have learned, followed by Communications (43,5%), social media(43.5%), FluidSurvey/ M&E(43.5%) and webinar/Go to meetings.(39.1%)

5.2.3 Is it helpful for your work in the project and other work in your organisation to be part of the CoP?

**Table 3**

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Yes; please explain:		100.0%	23
No; please explain:		0.0%	0
<b>Total Responses</b>			<b>23</b>

It is interesting to note that the responses, in most cases mirrored the short and long-term values to individuals and organizations as listed in the matrix in Table 1. Among the value statements for having a CoP for organizations, problem solving, time saving, knowledge sharing , re use of resources , knowledge sharing were mentioned Respondents indicated that it is a new and modern technique to disseminate experiences and that they have learned a lot of new strategies which they can apply on a project of an almost similar nature. They indicated that through the CoP they are now aware of the other partners' work and they have learned from their experiences. An interesting response was that it also creates a competitive environment to do better. Learning new things from the online CoP enriched their capacity a lot and they are learning how various organizations are tackling the same issues they are facing and their approaches. In regard re using of resources they said they can easily contact, share or spread the information reliably without any movement or additional cost. Respondents said it provides a platform for safe advocacy and it facilitate quick and timely decisions. A very important value of a CoP is that it helps with challenges and some respondents indicated that it helps them know, understand, discuss and resolve the problems On a personal level a CoP can assist participants to become confident, the respondents indicated that the CoP engaged and encouraged participants to participate in a dialogue on a particular issue.

The findings in this section confirms that respondents were able to engage actively in the CoP to be able to reap the benefits they have hoped for when joining .It is evident the unanimous response in whether the organization benefits that the respondents are very clear on what they have learned and how they can use the new knowledge in their organizations.

### **5.3 Enhanced capacity, constructing new knowledge**

5.3.1 What capacity building activities enhanced your capacity and increased your confidence for this project?

**Table 4**

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Webinar		78.3%	18
GoToMeeting		82.6%	19
Face to Face training		39.1%	9
Online training		52.2%	12
Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM)		82.6%	19
Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E)		56.5%	13
Communications		78.3%	18
Gender Equality		43.5%	10
Online Strategies for Awareness Raising		26.1%	6
Other, please specify...		13.0%	3
<b>Total Responses</b>			<b>23</b>

The findings indicate that the majority of respondents' capacity were enhanced in CEFM and GotoMeeting (82.6%) The GotoMeeting platform was used for various activities, but because it was a new platform to the majority of the respondents, one can assume that this was of high value to them. CEFM is also a brand-new terminology among the majority of the respondents and over the past months a lot of exchanges took place in the CoP though which their capacity was enhanced. One can assume that they rated it very high as most of them came into contact with this phenomena on this project for the first time and it is central in the work of GIRLS Inspire.

**5.3.2 What do you value most about the CoP?.**

When asked what the respondents valued most they were unanimous in their response that they valued the brand Team GIRLS Inspire. Attending the webinars enabled them to get to know the project as it manifest in other parts of the world. Respondents had high praise for the CoP which provided them with the opportunity to access so much information from a wide variety of sources / networks and through sharing of experiences. This was confirmed during webinars when they shared their experiences and advised each other. They indicated that the case studies which were uploaded as Blogs on the CoP was of immense value to inspire and guide them. They said they valued the blog writing option, where they can share their stories and success stories of their organization and they regard the CoP as a safe platform to publish without fear because of the security in a specific country. Case studies also allowed them to draw parallels among the various stories in their countries.

One of the seven principles of cultivating a CoP refers to *open a dialogue inside and outside perspectives* .Respondents valued the webinars which created *exposure to outer world and help us to learn from scholars, researchers, development practitioners which was impossible without the GIRLS Inspire project's initiatives*. Another principle which was highlighted though the responses was *the public and private community spaces*. Respondents indicated how they value sharing knowledge and collective experience, and the capacity to inform and being informed instantly and learning from each other.

It is evident from the findings above that the GIRLS Inspire CoP created a community where both the individual and community could generate new and deeper levels of knowledge through the sum of the group activities.

**5.3.3 How are you using the CoP to exchange knowledge with other members?** The four main strategies for the CoP were to provide connectivity, content, communication and context to allow the members to find value in the CoP. This section raised the question on how the members exchanged knowledge with other members. It was envisaged that they would apply these strategies in one or other way to exchange knowledge. With reference to connectivity and content, respondents indicated that they shared case studies, field experiences, innovative works and pictures with the team easily. In regard the context they said that they exchanged experiences, shared challenges, constraints and consulted with others to resolve them. Some respondents referred to the tools

they are using such as blogging on the GIRLS Inspire website where they connected with other members and shared their experiences citing the group discussions as a great option. The majority responded that they use emails in Basecamp, Skype, physical meetings, and telephones calls to communicate with others. One partner confirmed that they are replicating the communication strategy of using Skype to communicate with their branch teams. The findings confirm that respondents' capacity were enhanced through the CoP. The application of new knowledge is evidenced through the increased and sustained engagement on social media, blogging, correct use of the M&E platform and tools and the emergence of new leaders from the partners.

## **6 Conclusion and recommendations**

Communities of practise can be defined as feature and process based. Considering the responses from the respondents it is evident that the GIRLS Inspire CoP fits both definitions: Respondents elaborated how they are learning and sharing using the various tools in the GIRLS Inspire CoP such as Basecamp, emails, blogging, skype and social media. Through the construction and sharing of their stories, and through joint problem solving, they have increased their knowledge and enhanced their practice. The respondents also reported on the process of peripheral participation which takes place and allows the reproduction of knowledge through the process of joining and identification with the community .Furthermore the findings confirmed that respondents gained most of the short and long term value from the CoP as listed table 1. It is fair to conclude that the GIRLS Inspire CoP possesses the distinguishing characteristics of, a common ground which can be referred to as a common purpose or sense of identity; community, which creates a social learning environment where interactions can take place and relationships are build; and practice, which is the shared body of knowledge, and repertoire of resources; experience, stories, tools, best practice (Nicholson, 2009).

Considering that GIRLS Inspire wants to continue to nurture a vibrant CoP it is important to consider at what stage of the process it is. According to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, there are five stages of the development for a CoP, namely: Potential, Coalescing, Maturing, Stewardship and Transformation. Following the study it is clear that GIRLS Inspire CoP completed the first three stages and are now in Stage four, Stewardship where .”The key domain issue is to maintain the relevance of the domain and to find a voice in the organisation “In other words, the CoP must now maintain energy and enthusiasm and remain on the cutting edge” (Wenger et al, 2002). It is therefore timely to rejuvenate the community through a renewal workshop, actively recruit new people to the core group and continue to develop new leadership.

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