INTRODUCTION

More and more organisations are using projects as a means of managing their business; increasingly, ‘new initiatives’ are the focus of organisational life. Such initiatives could include cultural change programmes, organisation redesigns, or process improvements. Tackling the sociological and psychological aspects of the project is a great enough challenge, but there is often a requirement to develop a technological dimension too. Accelerating technical advancements brings an extra level of complexity to the projects so that, in general, projects have become more complex—not only do they tend to have a wider variety of customers to satisfy, but they also tend to utilise more sophisticated technology and have more far-reaching implications than ever before. It is not too surprising that some projects ‘fail’; the increased complexity of projects brings an obvious rise in the associated risks. However, the increased complexity of projects also brings a rise in the opportunities for learning through the management of knowledge therein. These are opportunities that are not being fully exploited at present, as illustrated by the continuation of the ‘failure-to-learn’ and ‘learning-to-fail’ themes in the literature (e.g., Lyytinen & Robey, 1999; Cannon & Edmondson, 2004); a more active stance would consciously draw lessons from projects, from ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ alike.

Parallel to the growing emphasis on projects in organisational life and their changing nature, there is growing recognition of the interplay between the fields of project management (PM) and knowledge management (KM). Reference has already been made to the opportunities for more effectively managing knowledge within a project
setting. This article operates at a finer level of
detail and draws attention to the potential synergy
between project teams and a much popularised
social network derived from the KM arena—that
of communities of practice (CoP). In doing so, the
disciplines of PM and KM are explicitly bridged
and, it is put forward, the prospect of breaking
the ‘learning-to fail’ and ‘failing-to learn’ loops
is raised.

BACKGROUND

New Knowledge and a Commitment
to Action

The following brief literature review is a platform
from which to launch the main thrust of the article
when CoPs are compared and contrasted with
project teams. Inevitably the reference material
is taken from the second-generation KM arena
where human and social aspects are central. Most
authors agree on the general characteristics of CoP;
this agreement can be tracked chronologically.
Of more interest and significance to this article
is the changing emphasis on CoPs’ intention to
act and the distinction that is, at times implicitly,
made about the possibility of CoPs generating
new knowledge.

Seminal works on CoPs are those of Lave and
Wenger (1991) and, later in that decade, Wenger
(1998). The concept is now well known throughout
the second-generation KM movement and used
by various authors. Pör (1998) describes commu-
nities as “connecting islands of knowledge into
self-organising, knowledge sharing networks.”
Skyrme (1999, p. 170) goes on to say:

_While some communities focus on a particular
profession or discipline, the most powerful
communities are customer or problem focused._
_They transcend disciplines and bring in different
perspectives. They exchange, develop and apply
knowledge._

The indication from Skyrme is that CoPs share
knowledge and in turn increase their knowledge
base and their sphere of application. However, this
is through the development of knowledge rather
than through its creation.

When distinguishing between their concept
‘enabling context’ and CoPs, Von Krogh, Ichijo,
and Nonaka (2000, pp. 179-180) assert:

_While a community of practice is a place in which
members learn knowledge that is embedded there,
an enabling context helps create new knowledge.
The boundary of a community of practice is firmly
set by the task, culture, and history of that com-
community, but an enabling context is determined
by the participants and can be changed easily.
Membership in a community of practice is fairly
stable, and it takes new members time to become
full participants. But the many organisational
members who interact in an enabling context
come and go. Instead of being constrained by
history, an enabling context has a here-and-now
quality—and it is this quality that can spark real
innovations._

There are various angles from which Von
Krogh et al.’s (2000) work could be challenged—
aspects such as the stability of a group and notions
of ‘participation’ and ‘task’ will be clarified in
the next section. However, Wenger (2000, p. 206)
confronts the aspect of whether CoPs generate
new knowledge when he states:

_What these groups have in common is that engag-
ing with each other around issues of common
interest, sharing insights and information, helping
each other, or discussing new ideas together are
all part of belonging to the group._

He goes on to be more specific when he states
that CoP provide “the resources that members use
to make sense of new situations and to create new
knowledge” (Wenger, 2000, p. 209), and refers
to good practice in World Bank and Daimler