

‘A comfortable space to learn and grow’: How novice vets use CoPs within their workplace to support socialization

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Track 15: Knowledge and Learning

Summary

The learning process for veterinary surgeons is lengthy, and after five years at university they still experience an extensive skills gap. This longitudinal study examines the experiences of twenty-five newly qualified vets as they transition from student to practitioner, highlighting the role of Communities of Practice in the socialization process. The vets were interviewed at three points over an 18-month period. The vets were employed in small independent practices through to large corporate practices, with this organisational context shaping their socialisation experience. The paper draws on both the Socialization and Communities of Practice literature to examine the structure of Communities of Practice in the veterinary profession and to identify the content of the learning and support they offer. It argues that positive relationships between novices and old-timers are necessary for the CoP to support learning.

1996 words

Research focus and Literature

Veterinary surgeons (vets) study at university for at least 5 years to become members of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, yet this is just the start of their learning. This paper examines how this learning is extended in the workplace, focusing on the vets’ first two years of practice and examining the role Communities of Practice (CoPs) play in the socialization process. Whereas much has been written about, for example, the socialisation of healthcare workers (Teoh, Pua and Chan, 2013), far less attention has been afforded to the veterinary profession. This paper provides insights into the structure of CoPs in the veterinary profession, categorises the learning they support and argues that negative relationships between novices and old-timers can act as a barrier to effective learning.

The general literature on organizational socialization focuses on three key areas of influence: first organizational tactics, second the characteristics and behaviour of the newcomer and third the role of other parties such as co-workers (Wanberg and Choi, 2012). The primary aim of socialization tactics is frequently thought to be uncertainty reduction. Newcomers will experiment with their own tactics to reduce uncertainty, often approaching experienced colleagues for advice. Learning is an integral aspect of socialization and will facilitate sense-making thereby reducing uncertainty (Ashforth, Sluss and Harrison, 2008). However, in the veterinary profession decisions are often based on incomplete information, and, as Clarke and Knights (2018) have highlighted, one thing vets need to learn is that it is often not possible to remove uncertainty.

The role of co-workers is key in helping novice vets gain proficiency in the required job skills. This is emphasized by Saks and Gruman (2017) who link the socialization process to the Job Demands-Resources model and suggest that engagement can be increased by providing newcomers with socialization resources to balance the job demands. Social capital resources are central to this and support from colleagues is an important socialization tactic.

Newcomers often access social capital resources through CoPs. The concept, originally developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), theorizes how learning may occur when situated in the workplace. Nicoli et al (2022) in their systematized literature review, identify the tensions which surround the definition of CoPs, highlighting the multiple interpretations of both ‘community’ and ‘practice’. They suggest that CoPs situated in the workplace, contain members who are bound by a desire to improve their expertise.

“By remaining in touch, they help one another to solve problems, transfer best practices, develop professional skills, and help organizations to retain talent.”
(Nicolini et al., 2022, p. 685).

A key purpose of CoPs is for learning, with novices developing professional competence through the process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 29). Novices initially engage with the CoP from the periphery, learning skills and knowledge from

‘A comfortable space to learn and grow’: How novice vets use CoPs within their workplace to support socialization

more experienced colleagues. The relationship with other CoP members also supports the development of a professional identity. As the novices develop their professional competence they move towards the core of the CoP, in turn sharing their experience with new members. However, the acquisition of knowledge is not a one-way process. As Brooks et al’s (2020) case study of firefighters demonstrates, novices play a valuable role in the CoP through sharing their knowledge of current best practice and motivating the old-timers to keep their knowledge current.

Learning within a CoP is comprehensive. Attempts have been made to categorise this socialization content, most frequently into three categories equating to the acquisition of skills and knowledge, general adjustment and effective support. However, there is discussion as to whether the second two categories are learning content or if they merely facilitate the acquisition of skills and knowledge (Ashforth, Sluss and Harrison, 2008).

This paper examines the role of CoPs in supporting the socialization of novice vets, both to inform our theoretical understanding and to guide practice. It will address the question: ‘How do CoPs support the learning and socialization of novice veterinary surgeons in the workplace?’. In answering this question, it will examine how CoPs operate in different types of practice and explore the learning content.

Research methods

Semi-structured interviews were held with twenty-five 2021 veterinary graduates sampled from every UK vet school. Interviews took place via Zoom. Participants were recruited via the closed Facebook group Vet Voices UK. Twenty-two of the vets were female and three were male. Thirteen of the vets worked in small animal practices with the remaining working in farm and mixed practices. Eighteen worked for practices owned by corporate organisations and seven were employed in independent practices. The study is longitudinal, with data being collected on three occasions over a 20-month period. Vets were interviewed between June and September 2021 before they started work, after they had been working for 6-8 months, and again after 12 – 18 months in practice. A total of 75 interviews were carried out, with all vets taking part in every interview.

Findings and discussion

These initial findings suggest that CoPs play an important role in the organisational and occupational socialization of vets. First, they demonstrate how integral CoPs are to the development of clinical and professional competencies, even though membership and scope differ between small animal and farm practices. Second, they highlight the breadth of learning which takes place within the CoP and third they raise questions about whether a positive relationship between the novice and the other members of the CoP is necessary for learning to take place.

‘A comfortable space to learn and grow’: How novice vets use CoPs within their workplace to support socialization

All novice vets rely on their colleagues for support. Their experiences reflect our traditional understanding of a CoP with the novice learning from a master, or in these cases several masters, and moving from the periphery to the core (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Participants described how they learned surgical skills by watching experienced vets, then performing operations under supervision, before finally working alone. The knowledge that assistance was available when needed, greatly increased their confidence to practice new tasks. It also improved their wellbeing by reducing risk and thereby reducing anxiety.

‘[When] I’ve got to place a catheter, I give myself, two or three shots, and then if I’m really struggling, I know I can just ask the nurse so it’s not really a high-pressure sort of situation.’ Ffion

All vets were members of CoPs although these operated differently for vets working in farm practices to those working in small animal practices. The nature of farm work meant that novice vets made visits on their own, even when they lacked confidence in performing a procedure. However, this did not mean they were without help, as they connected with their CoP via a phone call or video call whilst working remotely. This allowed the experienced vet to view the operation and explain the next steps. Most vets were part of WhatsApp groups and could quickly obtain advice from several vets, often including vets on maternity leave or those who had left the practice but continued to share experience. This suggests that, as in the case of firefighters (Brooks, Grugulis and Cook, 2020), these old-timers also gained value from this participation. Experienced vets learned from the new vets, taking advantage of their current knowledge and adapting the gold standard approach they had been taught to the realities of low-income clients.

Vets working in small animal practices were also members of WhatsApp groups, even though they could obtain face-to-face advice more easily.

‘we call it The Vet Questions Chat, so ... especially if we’re in one of the branches sole charge, we can just message and be like, ‘What’s this? I don’t know what’s happening’ and someone can give you advice’ Sally

CoP membership consisted of both vets and non-vets. Participants talked about the valuable knowledge obtained from animal technicians and nurses and described how they respected their expertise.

‘the foot trimmers they’re so skilled at what they do and they’re so willing to teachthey all do their own individual things and they’re all very good at them’ Ruth

It was interesting to note the breadth of knowledge which was shared by the CoPs. As the literature suggests, (Ashforth, Sluss and Harrison, 2008), although this primarily involved clinical skills, the vets placed equal importance on the learning shared regarding coping with job stress and, on the locality, culture and politics of the practice. When the vets first arrived,

‘A comfortable space to learn and grow’: How novice vets use CoPs within their workplace to support socialization

members of the CoP invited them to social events and provided local information. This community knowledge helped to build a foundation for a beneficial work life balance. Members also shared advice on pushing back against unreasonable demands and consequently helped the vets to develop the skill of resilience. They also provided support during the novices’ low points by demonstrating compassion and narrating stories describing how other vets had overcome difficult events.

‘I’ll have gone to bed worrying about whether or not a sheep’s going to die, and [my mentor’s] like, “you’ve done exactly as I would do, it’s fine” and that’s so valuable because I definitely am a go-to-bed-worrying kind of person’ Katie

The breadth of knowledge exchanged within the CoP is interesting as this highlights the importance of social capital resources to support the socialization process, (Saks and Gruman (2017). Most participants emphasised the value of the support offered by colleagues, and in many cases stated that this persuaded them to remain with their current practice.

‘I don’t think I’d be as happy as I am here without the support of colleagues.... the two senior vets are fantastic in that any question that I have, no matter how silly it seems, they are happy to answer’ Becky

This therefore raises the question as to whether CoPs can operate effectively without friendly, trusting relationships between colleagues. Whereas Becky was comfortable asking questions, Alex was worried about the consequences of making mistakes,

‘If I make a mistake the first time, it’s fine, there’s no problems as long as I learn from it, but the moment I make the mistake a second time, ... I start to feel quite micromanaged’ Alex

It is possible that a precursor to an effective CoP is a trusting relationship in which novices feel safe.

Over time the novices transition from the periphery to the core of the CoP, and there was evidence of this in the study. The vets talked about the rewarding experience of answering colleagues’ questions and how this contributed to the development of their identity as a ‘vet’ rather than a ‘new grad’. The arrival of the 2022 graduates emphasised the extent of knowledge gained in a year. However, those vets who did not feel part of a CoP were less confident about their skills and the arrival of new graduates became an additional source of stress.

‘Sometimes you’ve gone along with some things, but you don’t know whether you’re doing it right’ Rhian

Finally, as highlighted by Nicolini et al (2022), vets used the CoP to inform their identity. Through observing how other members of the CoP behaved in different circumstances, the

‘A comfortable space to learn and grow’: How novice vets use CoPs within their workplace to support socialization

novices were able build a picture of the type of vet they wished to be. Actions such as experienced vets asking their opinion, influenced their perception of their current identity.

‘so people coming to me for questions, like “can I chat this one through with you”? That was really nice, you just feel like you’re on the same level playing field as vets who are, four, five, thirty years out of the industry’ Mandy

This paper outlines some of the initial findings of the study, highlighting the central role that CoPs have in supporting the learning and wider socialization of novice vets. The full paper will develop fig. 1 which captures the themes of the study and builds a contribution, drawing on the insights of the socialization and CoP literature. It highlights the learning content which informs the socialization process and the CoP members who facilitate this learning. Before the conference I will review the literature further, with the aim of narrowing the focus and further refining this model.

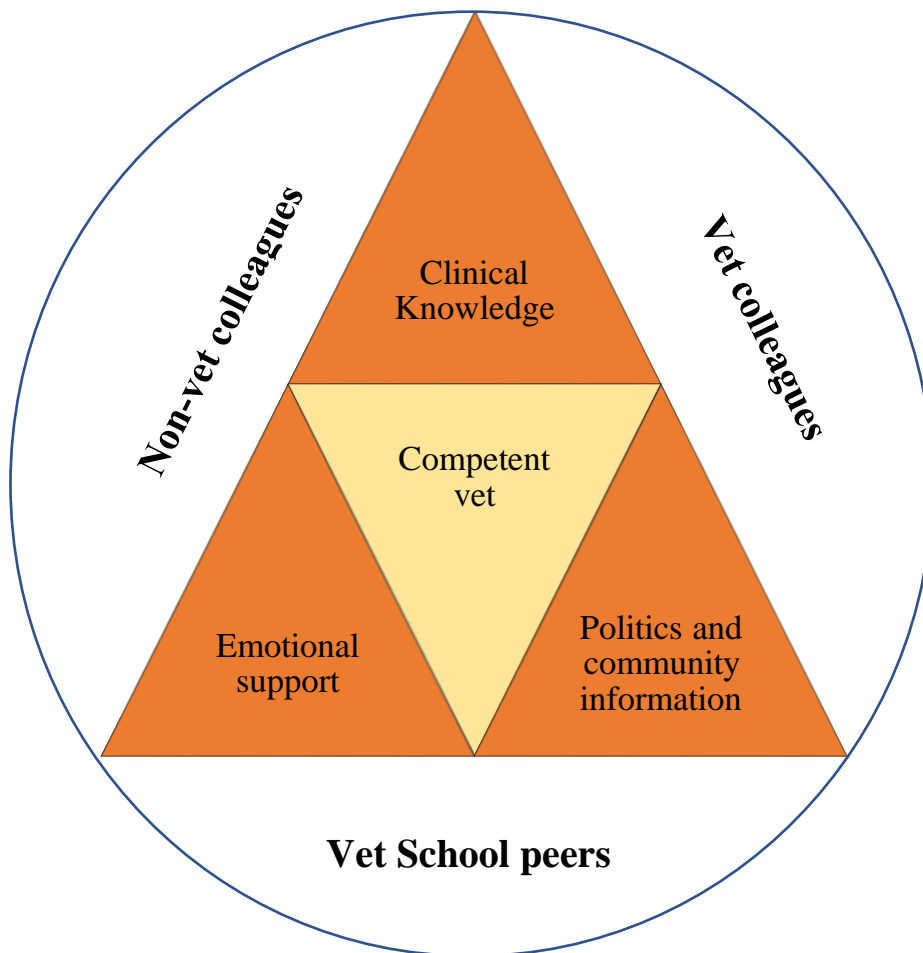


Fig. 1 Content of a novice vet CoP

‘A comfortable space to learn and grow’: How novice vets use CoPs within their workplace to support socialization

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