

User Experience Design as Communities of Practice

Andrew Hinton
August 2007

Slides with notes will be available at
inkblurt.com/presentations

Two Chapters

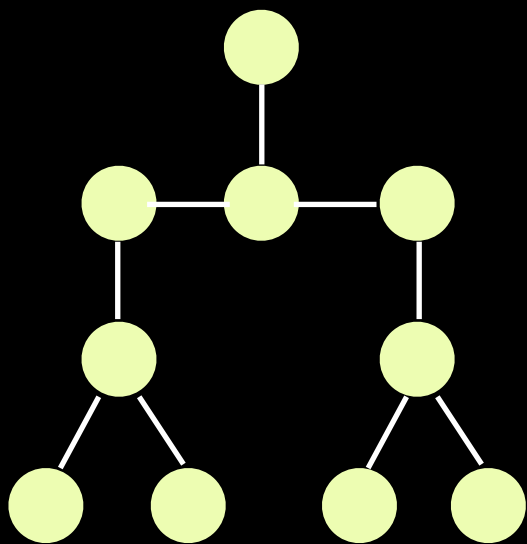
I. Communities of Practice

2. Practice, Discipline & Identity

Chapter I

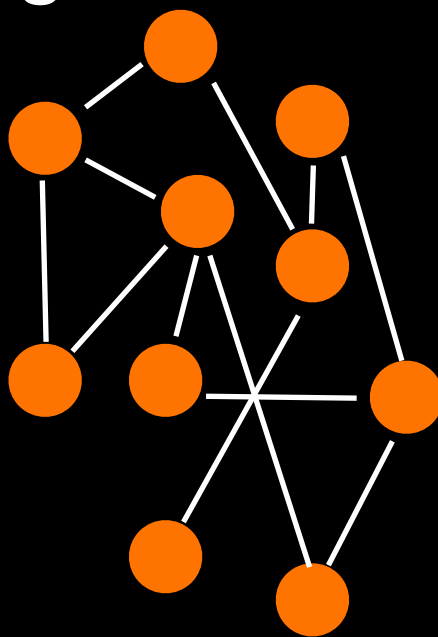
Communities of Practice

Top-Down Command Hierarchy



Team/Management/Military

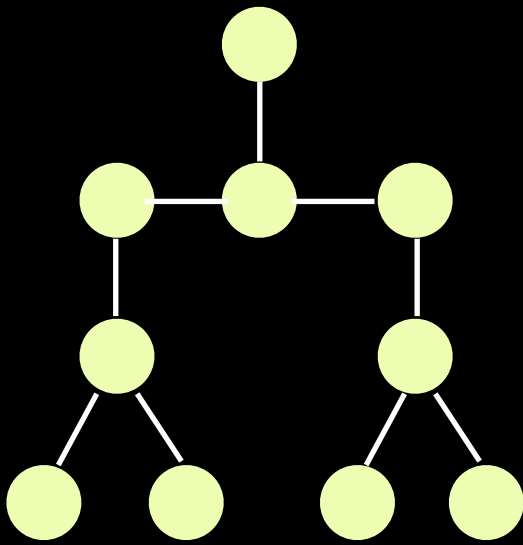
Emergent Organic Network



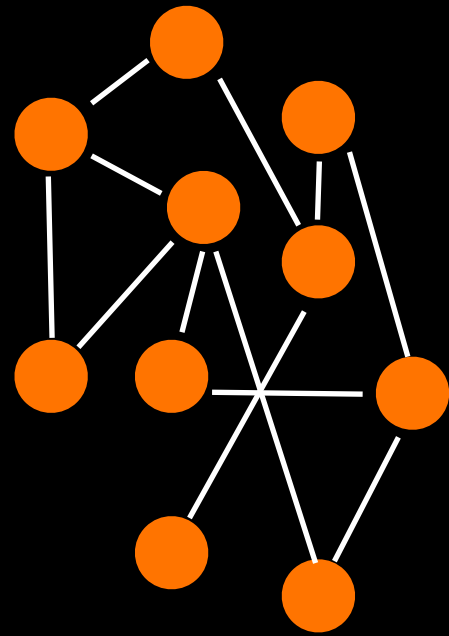
Crowds/Friends/Incidental Networks

Let's start with two patterns. One extreme is very controlled, the other is on the other side of the spectrum -- an organic, completely uncontrolled network of crowds and incidental networks.

Instruction



Conversation

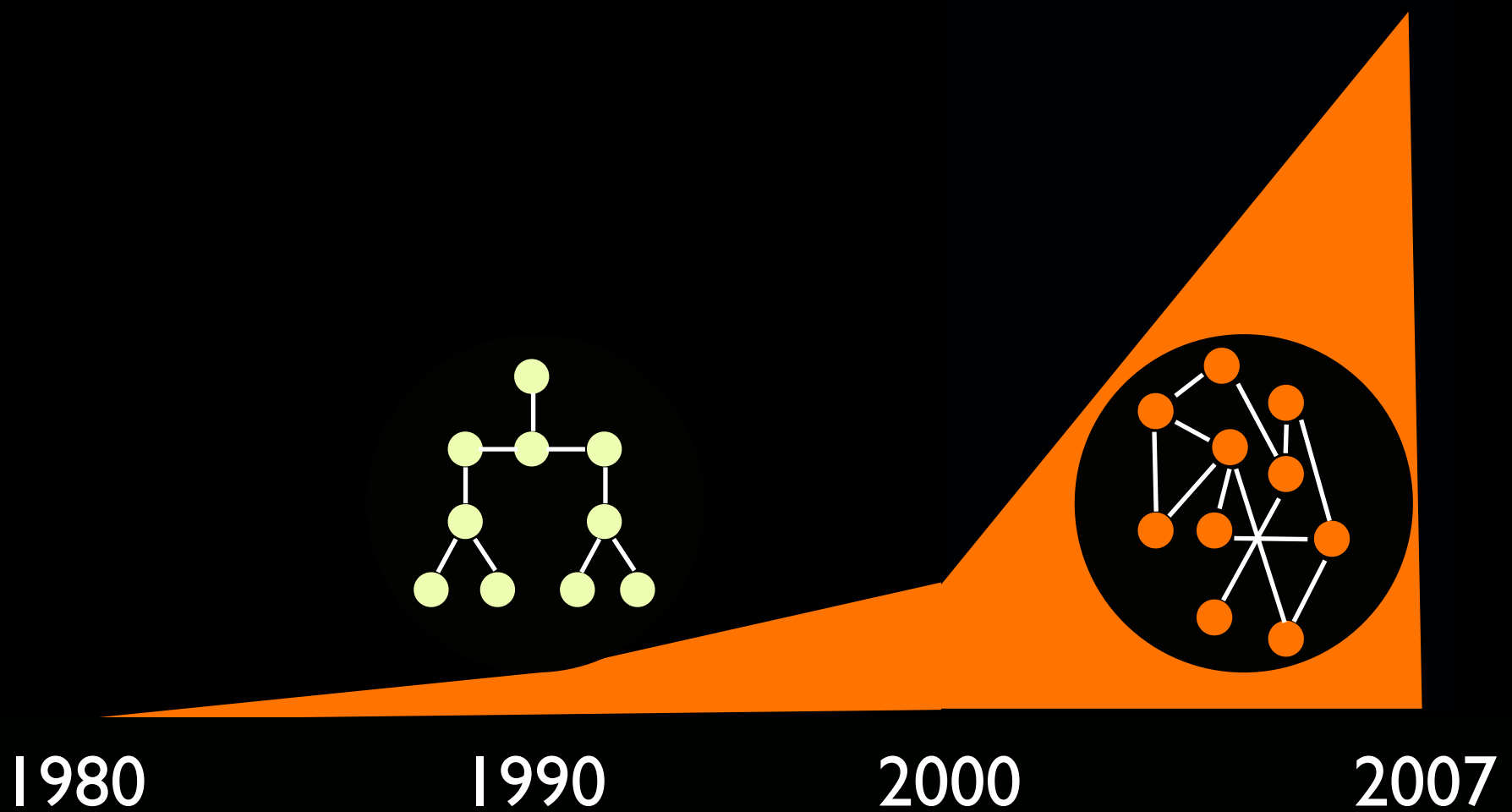


One important difference between these two patterns is this: the hierarchy is all about instruction. It assumes that you're going to receive knowledge by having it distributed from an authority into a receiving party.

The other is about conversation: knowledge emerges through the mutual engagement between peers.

Both of these models are valid, but as we'll see, something interesting is happening with the conversational model.

Group Creation Capabilities



Conversations have found an incredibly rich medium in the Internet.

As just one indicator:

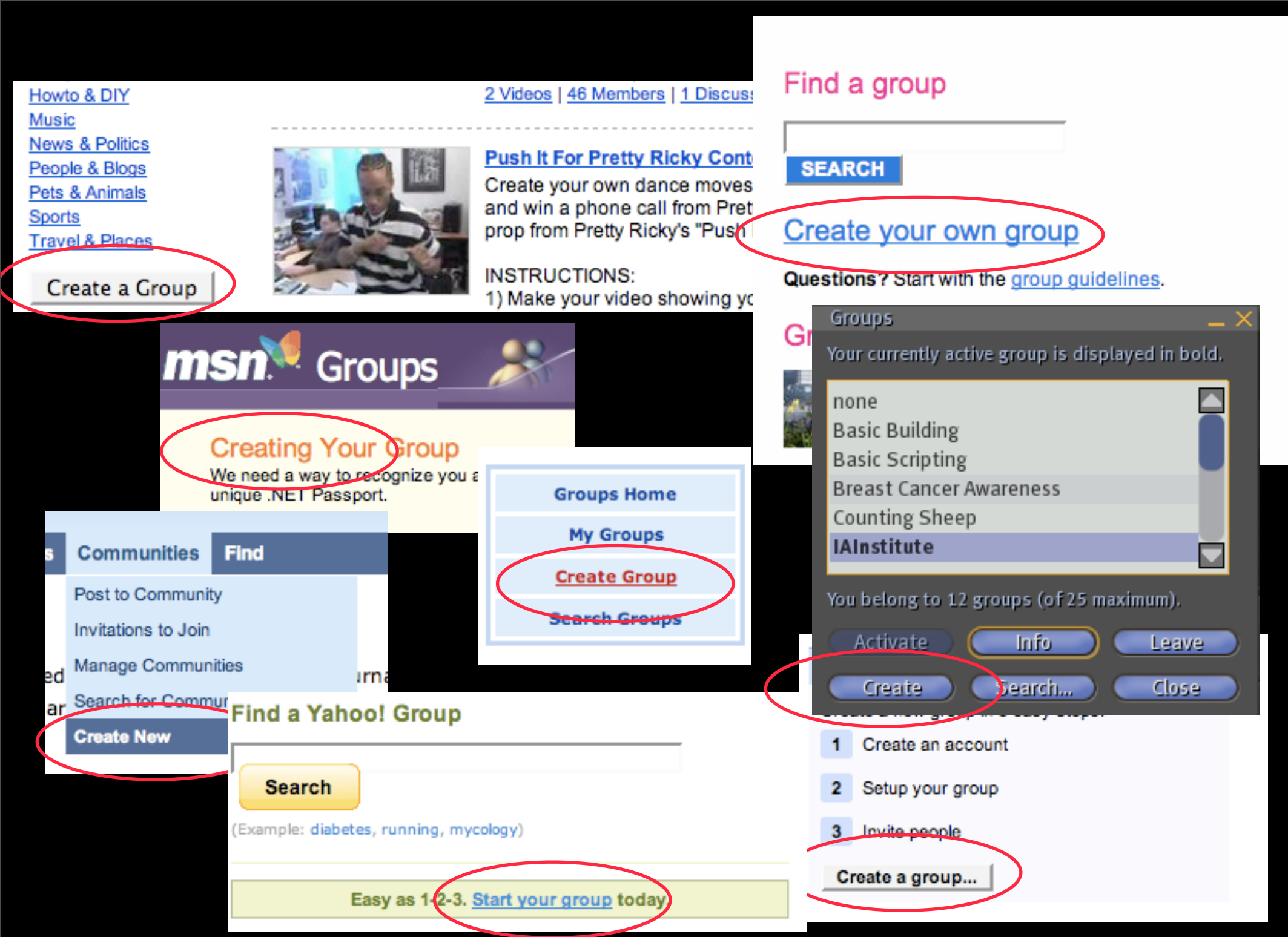
Before the Internet, there were very few ways to create groups: newspapers, local associations, things like that.

>>

But even by 2000, there were only a few main places online, like E-Groups (Now Yahoo Groups) or USENET, and the venerable ListServ mailing lists hosted here and there, usually in universities.

>>

Suddenly, in the last 5–6 years, we've seen an incredible explosion -- almost any social software environment has an ability to create a "community" or "group". I think that's a big part of what has caused the Web 2.0 phenomenon.



Everywhere you look, you can create a group. It's become a sort of commodity: people are coming to just expect to be able to make a group at the click of a button.

And this really is more than just more of the same; I think it represents a cultural shift that has some very significant implications.

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February 13, 2006

Social Computing

How Networks Erode Institutional Power, And What to Do About It

by [Chris Charron](#), [Jaap Favler](#), [Charlene Li](#)

with [Jennifer Joseph](#), [Manuela Neurauter](#), [Sally M. Cohen](#), [Tenley McHarg](#), [Jed Kolko](#)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Easy connections brought about by cheap devices, modular content, and shared computing resources are changing the global economy and social structure. Individuals increasingly take cues from one another rather than from corporations, media outlets, religions, and political bodies. To thrive in an era of Social Computing, companies must change their management and communication tactics, weave communities into their products and services, use e-commerce to become part of a living fabric of brand loyalists.

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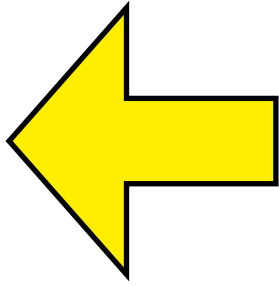
► Technology Embeds Itself In Social Behavior

- Technology Brings Power To The Masses
- Social Trends Fuel Technology's Changing Role
- Why You Should Care About Social Computing

NOTES & RESOURCES

For this report, we analyzed Forrester's Consumer Technology trends to discern key trends.

RELATED RESEARCH DOCUMENTS

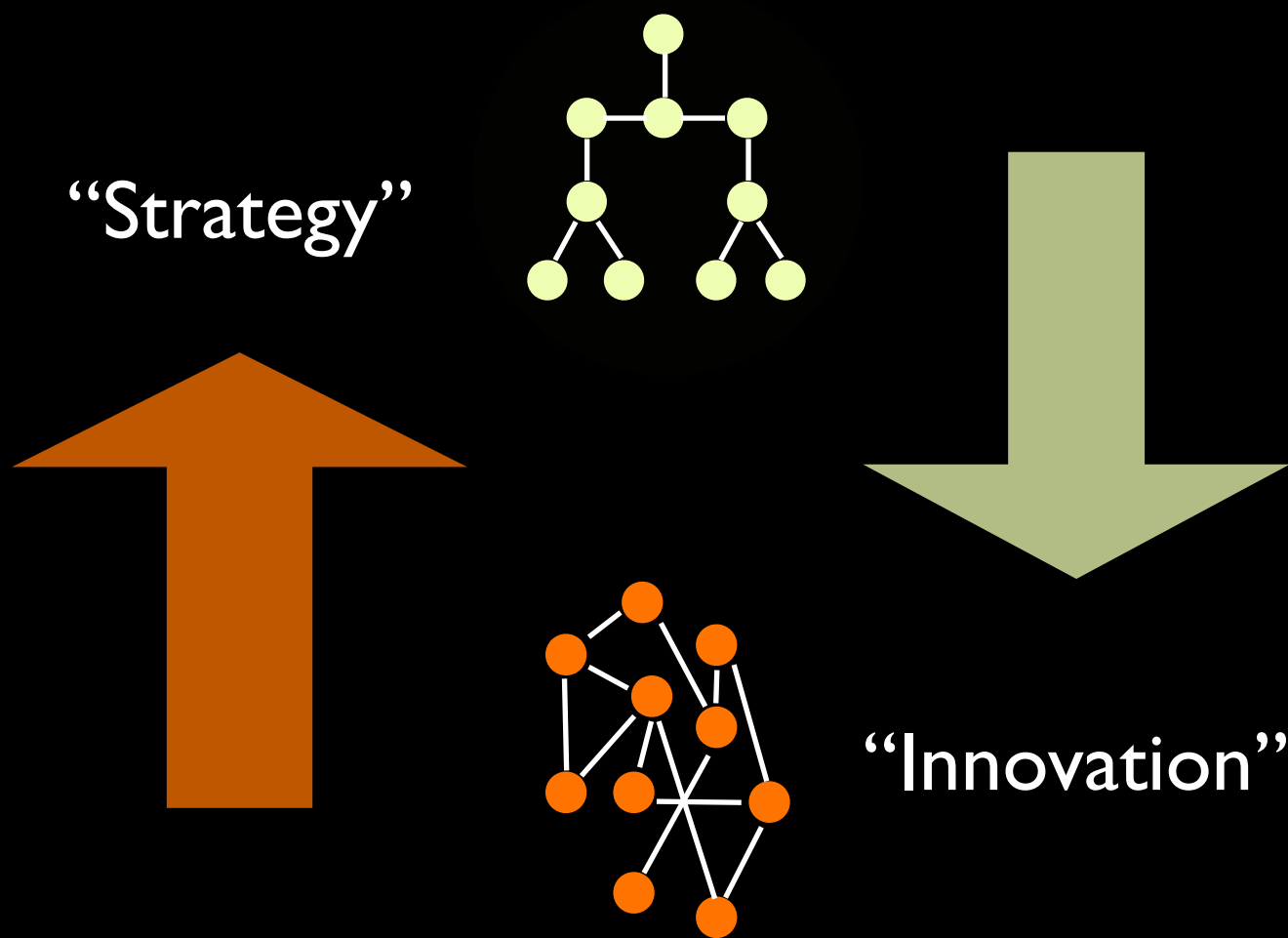


Forrester, last year, had an excellent report on “How Networks Erode Institutional Power, And What to Do About It.”

It’s just one of many whitepapers and bits of research explaining this trend. Essentially, as the ubiquity and operational necessity of free-form communication technologies increases, the less control traditional institutions have over the people’s actions and words.

There is a cultural shift going on, and much of it is due to this infrastructure.

Forrester: Social Computing: How Networks Erode Institutional Power, and What to Do About It
<http://forrester.com/Research/Document/Excerpt/0,7211,38772,00.html>



Another quick point about this dichotomy.

There's a lot of obsession lately with the ideas strategy and innovation. We talk about these things like we know what they are, and can assume they automatically work in tandem.

But ore often than not, strategy comes from the mentality of the traditional hierarchy.

- >> Someone at the top of the ladder has a grand vision, and a genius way to make it happen, and devises a strategy. And everyone else is expected to follow it.
- >> Whereas most innovations happen from the ground up -- they emerge from the interactions between peers (or people who, in those interactions, treat one another as peers).

So my point here is, we throw these terms around almost like they're the same thing, but I don't think they are.

For example, what does it mean to have "An Innovation Strategy"???

This is why I think an understanding of how people work and learn in Communities of Practice is so important right now -- that understanding can help make these layers complementary.

“Domain”

“Communities of Practice are 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.”



Etienne Wenger

“Practice”

“Community”

Etienne Wenger, who coined the phrase, defines it like this.

>>

DOMAIN: A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. 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. (Wenger)

>>

PRACTICE: Members are practitioners, developing a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems. This takes time and sustained interaction.

A good conversation with a stranger on an airplane may give you all sorts of interesting insights, but it does not in itself make for a community of practice. (Wenger)

>>

COMMUNITY: In pursuing joint interests 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. A website in itself is not a community of practice. Having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together. (Wenger)

There are many qualities to a Community of Practice, but here are a few major points about them.

(photo and quotes from etienne’s site)

[Note: I’ll be referring to Etienne’s book, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity(CoP LMI) throughout the presentation. Cambridge Univ Press 1998]

“Practice is a shared history of learning.”



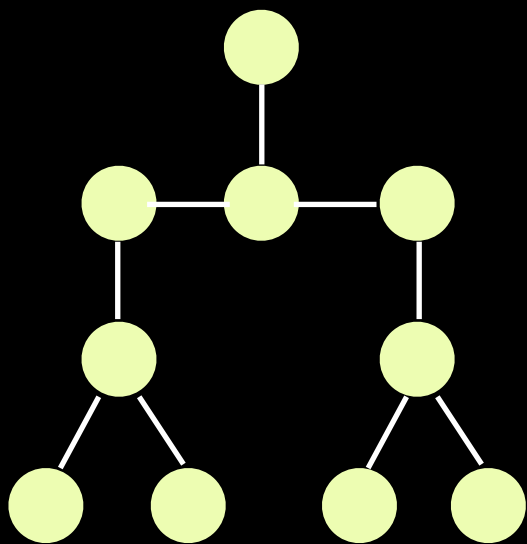
Etienne Wenger

One important distinction Wenger makes that I want to help frame the rest of what I’m discussing is that “Practice is a shared history of learning.”

Now, that’s not **everything** a practice is, but it is central. And the definition is important because it takes the focus away from so many of the things we tend to think of when we think of a practice -- such as tools, or even degrees. It has more to do with a history of mutual engagement.

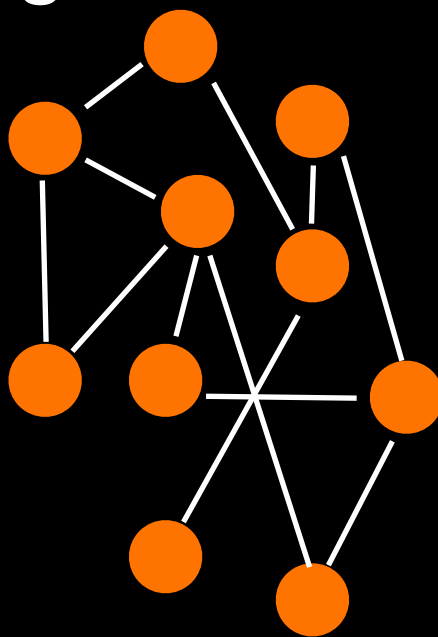
Wenger: CoP, LMI p 102

Top-Down Command Hierarchy



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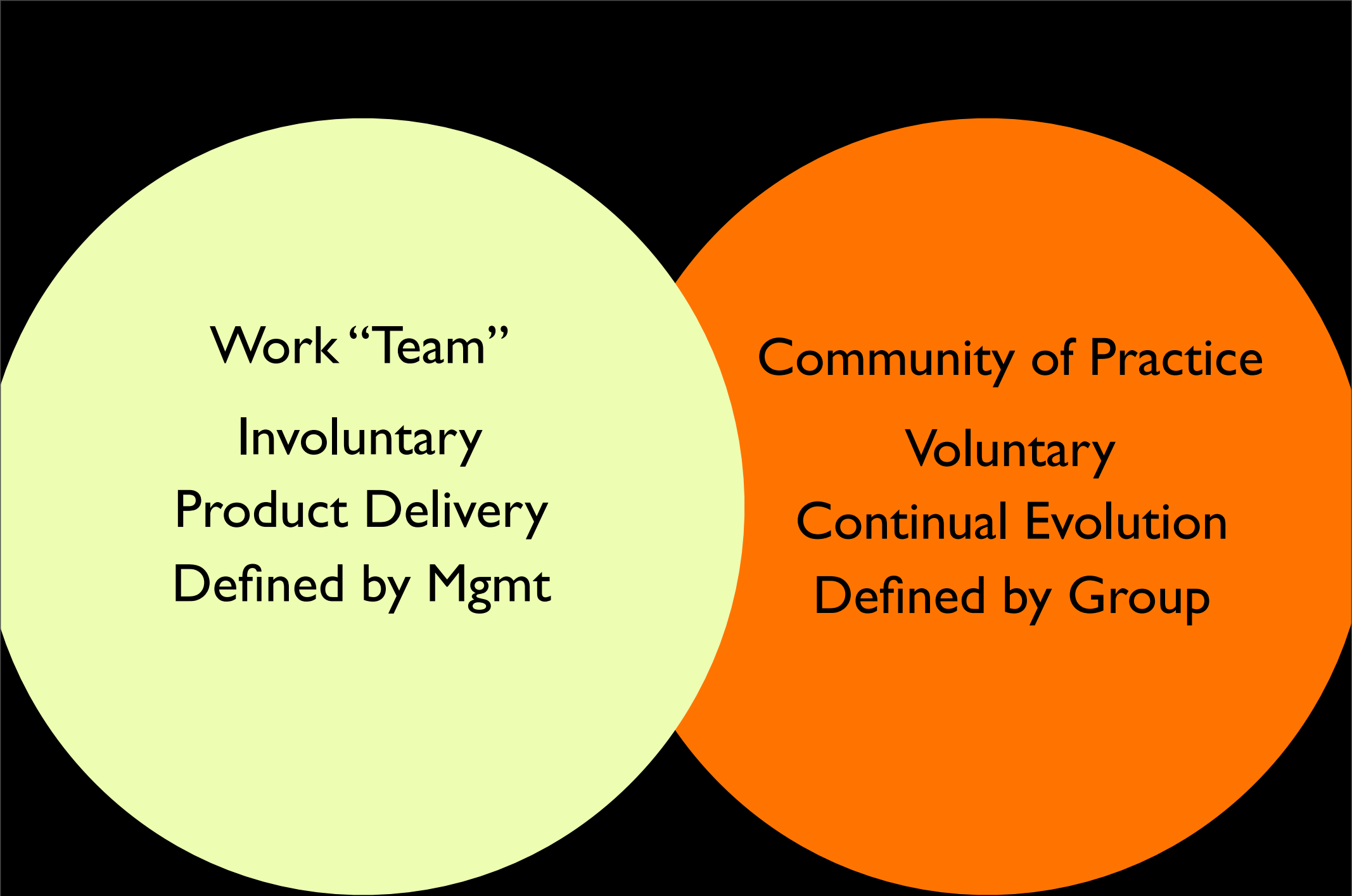
Communities
of Practice

So, on our little spectrum, I think Communities of Practice fit right about here.

They tap into emergence, but they have some structure -- though their structure comes from focus on their domain, not from an outside authority.

How are they different from teams?

One way understand what something is, is to understand what it is not. For a moment, let's focus in particular on the distinction between Communities of Practice and Work Teams, since that's especially relevant in the workplace.



Work “Team”
Involuntary
Product Delivery
Defined by Mgmt

Community of Practice
Voluntary
Continual Evolution
Defined by Group

Let's look at just a few characteristics of both.

>>

Teams are Involuntary -- you're assigned to them -- but Communities of Practice are very organic, and people get involved in them because of their interest, not to fulfill an obligation.

>>

A team's purpose is to deliver products, on delivery dates. But a Community of Practice's purpose is its own evolution -- Learning, Making & Improving -- the continual improvement of practice and knowledge among its members. There's no delivery date -- even though the community often may set goals and work together on meeting them, it's in the service of the ongoing evolution.

>>

And not only are a team's members and goals assigned, it's entirely defined by the organization's management structure. **Without an org chart, it wouldn't exist.** A Community of Practice is defined by the aggregate of its members, and whatever domain they happen to share in common.

>>

This means that management really doesn't have much of an idea what to *do* with a CoP. It doesn't fit the MBA concept of a managed organization. Even though, in almost any workplace, they exist in some form or another, and in many organizations they're essential to the org's success.

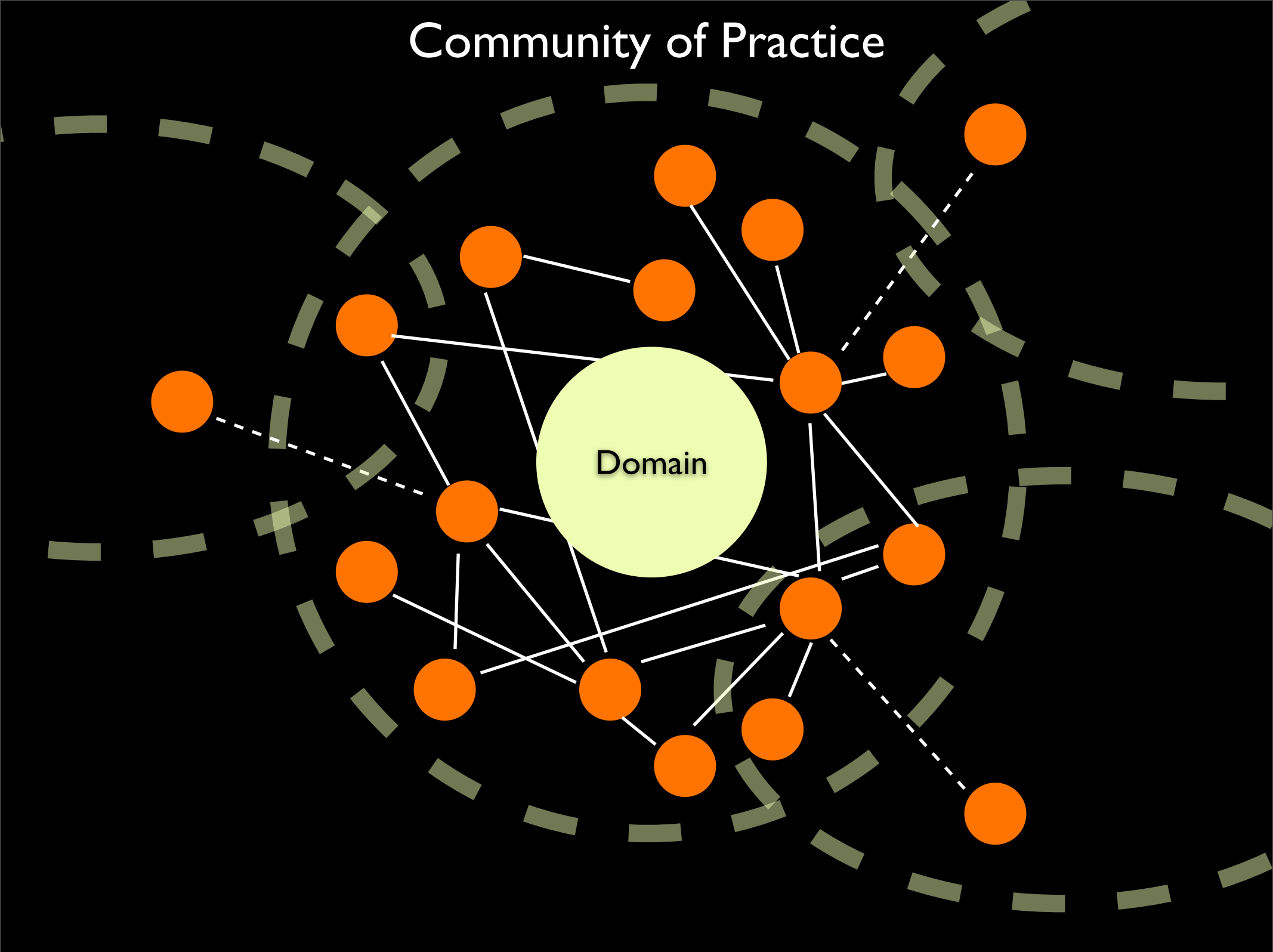
Does this mean Teams and CoPs are mutually exclusive? No... in fact, sometimes the best teams have taken it upon themselves to become communities of practice >>

They can work in a complementary fashion -- but often they end up blurring boundaries between other teams and branches in the organization.

By the way this is something management often doesn't understand: that when you put something organic down it tends to grow roots. If you've ever been in a team that you felt like you really grew with, and felt like a community, then were arbitrarily transferred to some other team ... you feel ripped out by the roots. That's why.

based in part on http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge_management/km2/cop_toolkit.asp

Community of Practice



(10 min)

A community of practice is in a sense a hybrid pattern -- it's informal, emergent, just like a general social network,

>>

but it has a center of gravity -- the domain -- that acts loosely as an organizing principle.

>>

Members may come in and out, it may shift over time, even its domain can sometimes migrate to a new focus. Notice the defining circle is dotted -- it's a soft, permeable boundary.

>>

Sometimes it attracts outsiders who are loosely involved because they have an interest in the domain.

>>

These people are often part of other practices, and bring skills along with them.

And this is all perfectly OK... in fact, it's essential. This whole ecosystem of members and ideas is part of what helps these patterns thrive.

Things that will not work:

Creating, designing or “optimizing” a CoP.

Appropriating a CoP into normal management structure.

Treating all CoPs like utopian love-fests.

Things that may work:

Cultivating the conditions for healthy CoPs.

Management structure mutually coexisting with a CoP.

Relating to CoPs as a pattern of human interaction.

There's plenty of great advice out there for how to cultivate these communities, but I'm just going to hit a few.

Things that really just won't work:

>> You can't create or “optimize” a CoP. I hear it all the time: “hey this is an interesting problem, let's put together a community of practice around this!” It doesn't work.

>> It also doesn't work to assimilate a CoP or cram it into normal management expectations and structures. Once you see there's one working, the one of the worst things you can do is try to make it “official.” This, by the way, is why so much enterprise knowledge software is fundamentally broken: it doesn't take into account the emergent, organic nature of this way of working and tries to codify and make explicit everything the community does. As soon as it's captured in a data table, it's no longer a Community of Practice.

>> You can't assume that a CoP is inherently “good” or utopian. People are in it for their own self interest: they're practical (hence ‘practice’) and want to learn and get better and have a higher standing among their peers. Some CoPs turn out to be about horrible things! All of them also have some jerks in them.

Things that might work, however:

>> Learning to cultivate the conditions that help CoPs thrive.

>> Thinking of the CoPs as something different from but complementary to management structures -- much like healthy cities co-existing with nature in a mutually beneficial way.

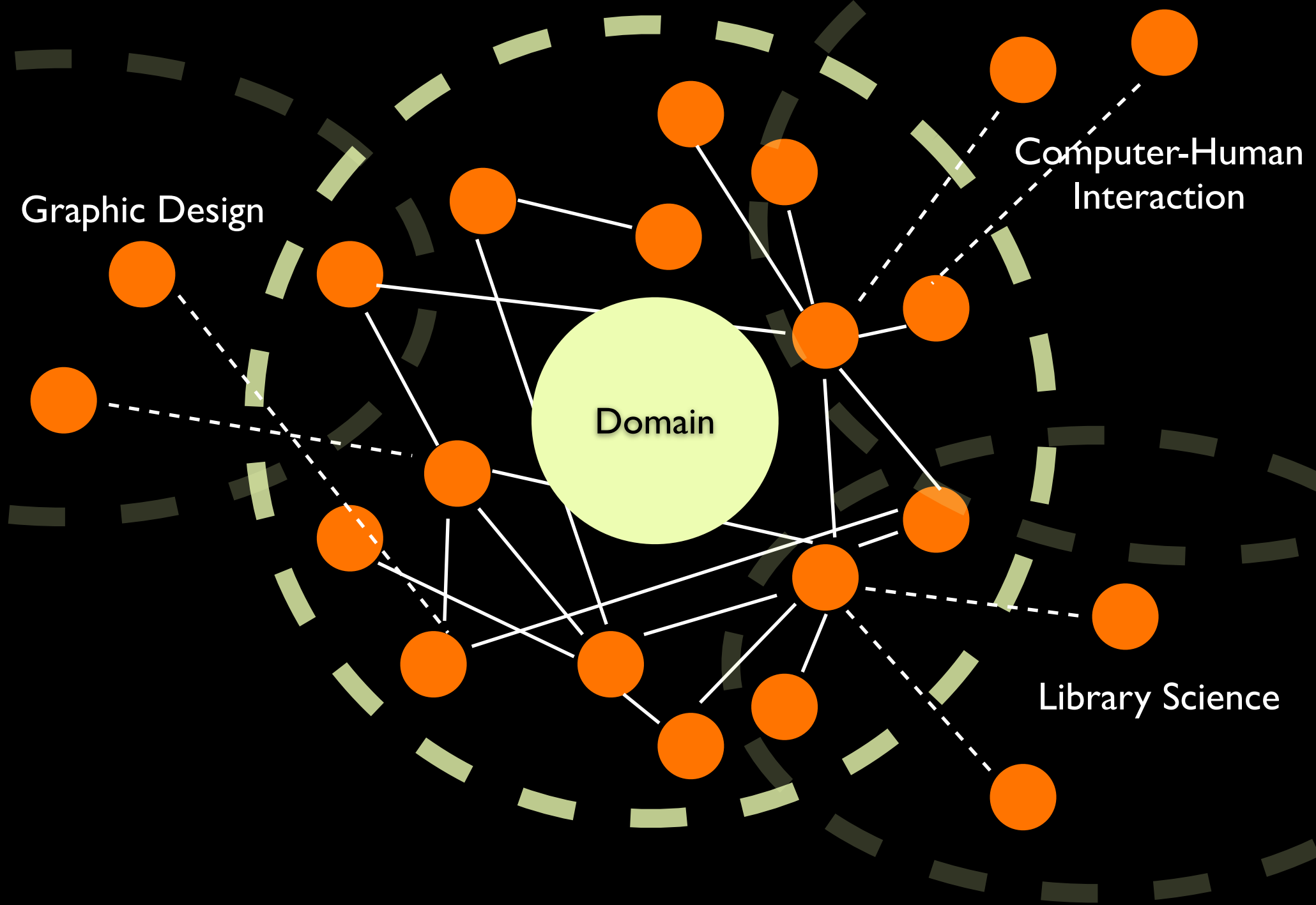
>> And remembering that CoPs are a DESCRIPTION of a pattern of human interaction -- not a prescription for how to collaborate and learn together. It's something people already do -- they just need conditions that help them do it better.

Chapter 2

Practice, Discipline & Identity

So now that we've covered a bit of groundwork on what Communities of Practice are, and why understanding them is even more relevant now, I want to focus on some important ideas around how they work and how that can teach us things about the way we work together as professionals.

A Given UX Practice



We talk a lot about our disciplines. What discipline am I? What discipline are you?

What is a designer? What is design? What is User Experience vs. Interaction Design?

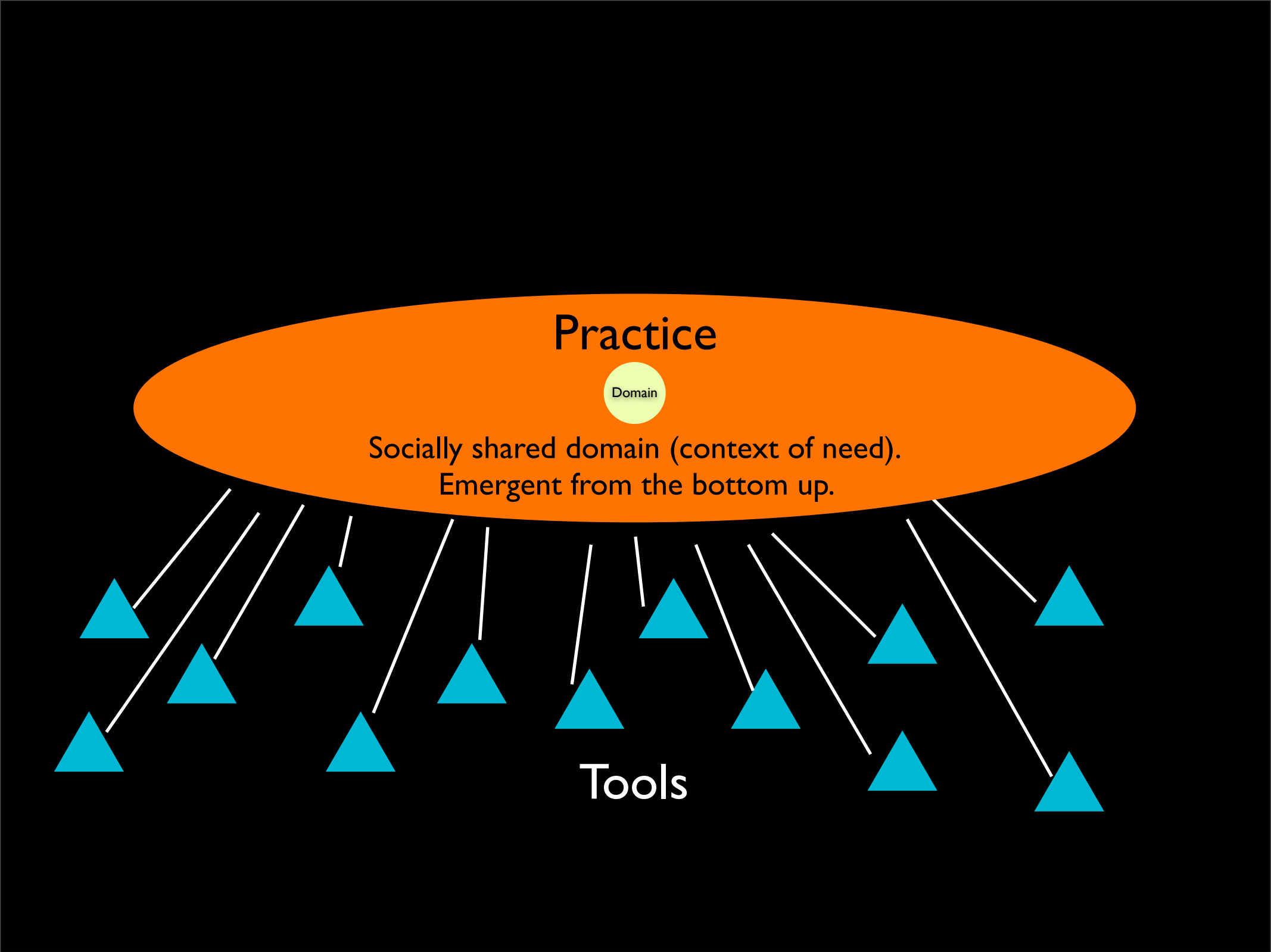
We use words like practice, discipline and profession as if we all agree on what they mean to begin with. There's a lot of friction around which discipline does what, and how to define it all.

It may be helpful to define these terms a little better so we can have some more clarity.

So here's a given user-experience related practice.

>>I'm sure everyone here comes from some community of practice background, and you find that you interact with others from other backgrounds, and even share and overlap interests and work. It's actually a **GOOD** thing! This borrowing and interdependency is necessary to how practices work, and they wouldn't exist without it.

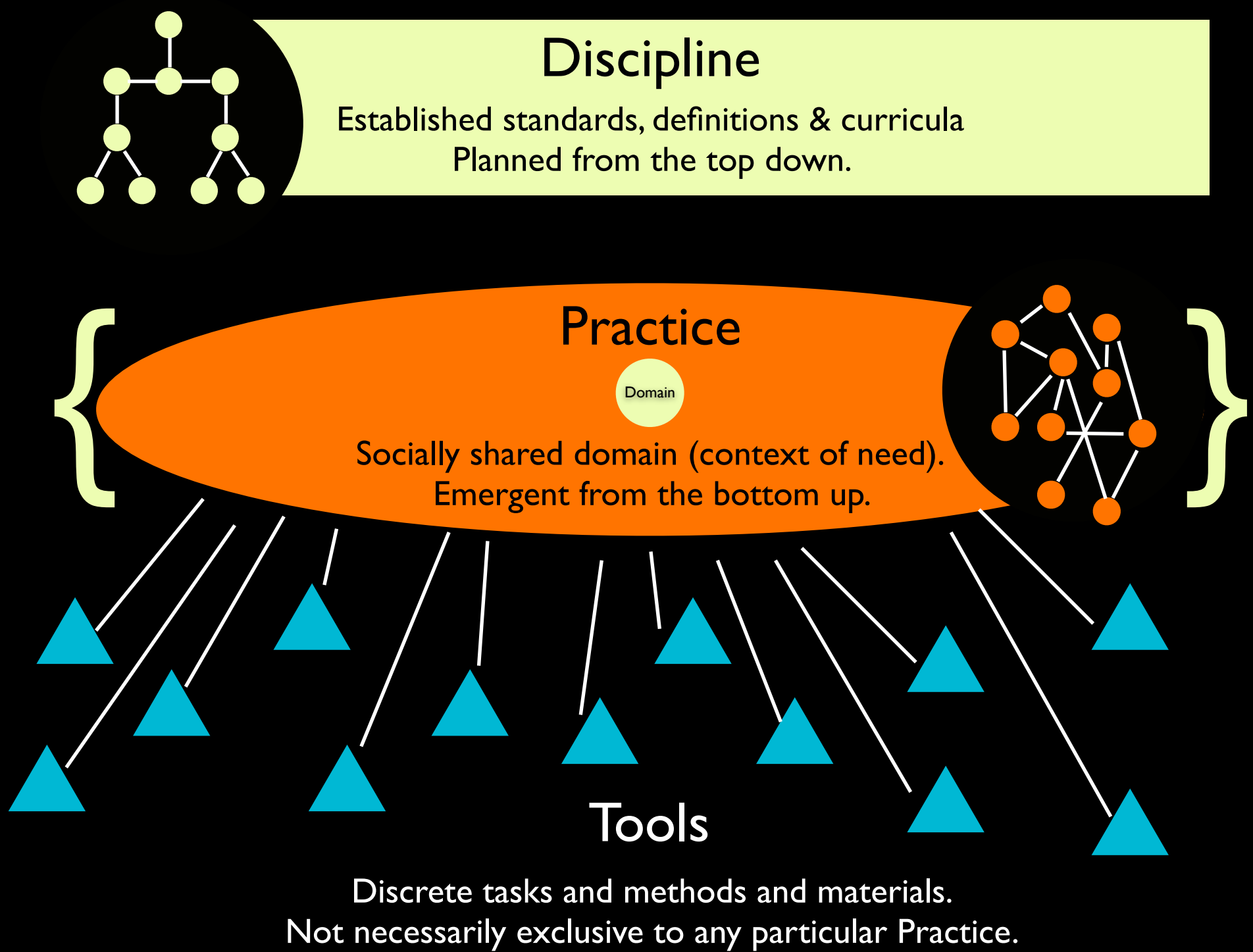
So, why do we get into such heated discussions about who we are, what we do, authority and background an identity?



As we’ve established, a Practice organizes itself around a socially shared domain, and it’s an emergent, bottom-up entity.

>>
A practice, by its nature, has many tools at its disposal.

So, often we tend to think of ourselves as members of a particular community who use particular tools. This informs a great deal of how we see ourselves and our peers and our work: our identities, like it or not, are highly wrapped up in this context.



As a Practice sticks around a while, it may want to seek professional legitimacy in the marketplace. A practice can start feeling uncomfortable that there isn't some actual, concrete entity out there that represents it in the world.

>> Most of the professional world -- the world where you get paid to do what you do -- is still based on this top-down, defined way of doing things. That's in its DNA. And so that's how it goes about judging the world around it. It looks for those qualities in the professions and professionals it chooses to accept. But a community of practice isn't like that, and really can't be like that -- it has different DNA.

>>

A practice that yearns for that acceptance tries to establish some kind of "discipline" to give it that structure.

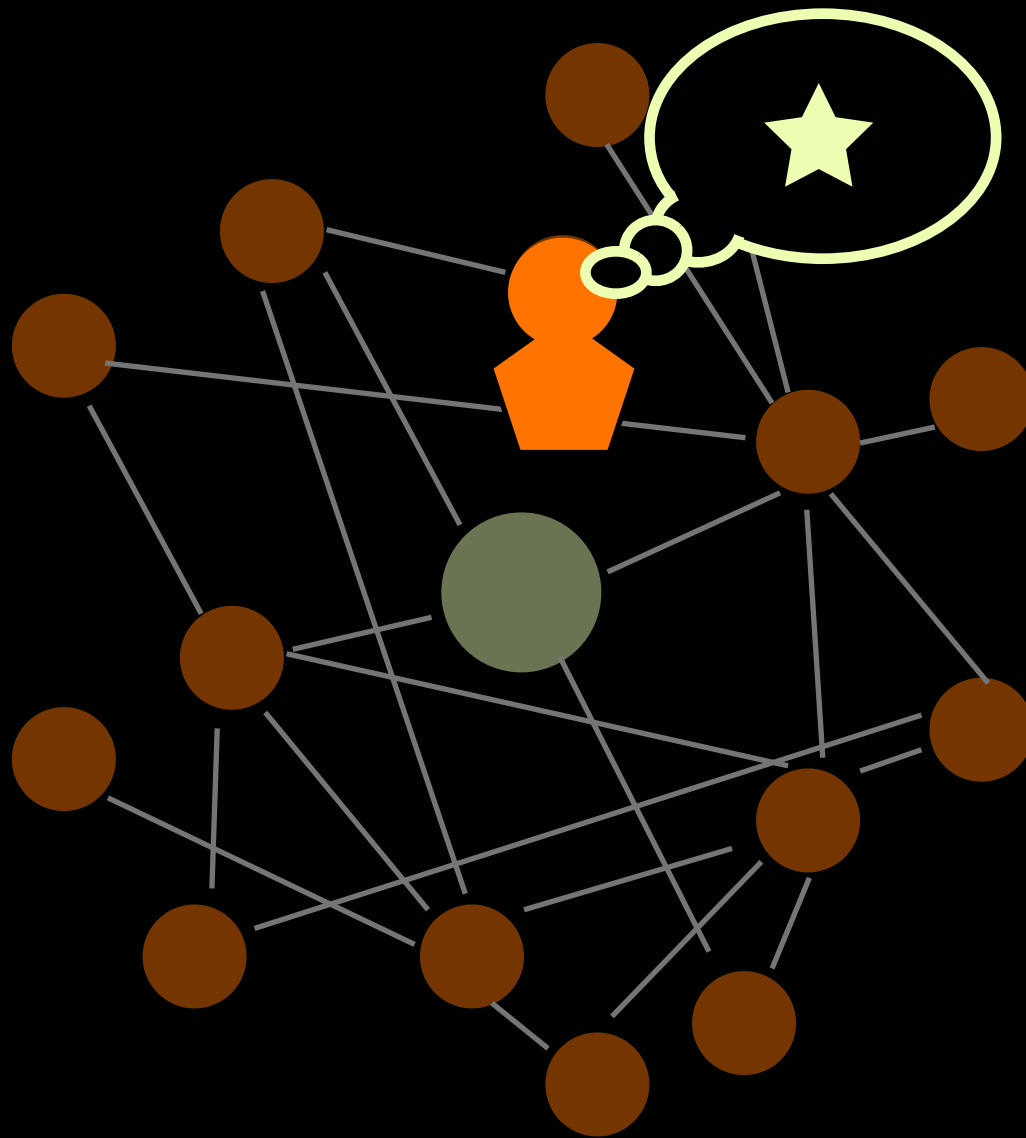
A discipline establishes standards and definitions, creates curricula, and plans things from the top down. Because of their different natures, there's always some tension between a practice and its discipline, but in the best circumstances it can be a productive tension.

And the discipline then gives a sort of mantle of respectability to the practice; but also channels money, resources, attention and lots of other good things.

>>

But even once the discipline provides a definition, it doesn't replace the practice. The practice and the discipline continue influencing one another in a symbiotic relationship.

So why do we identify so heavily with our 'disciplines' when the generative source of so much of what we do is actually at the level of practice and the community around that practice? Why are CoP's so invisible to us, but disciplines so visible?



Participation

Let's dig a little deeper into the theory around Communities of Practice to understand this issue better.

Etienne Wenger says that we get “meaning” from mutual engagement -- participation in the world around us. In the case of a practice, then, it's mainly the community around that practice that shapes how we think of ourselves and our work and what it means.

>> So, here I am, an individual in a social context. We are all participants in various social contexts of work, play, belonging -- and in that participating, we (whether we know it or not) “negotiate meaning” -- we construct whole layers of meaning for ourselves.

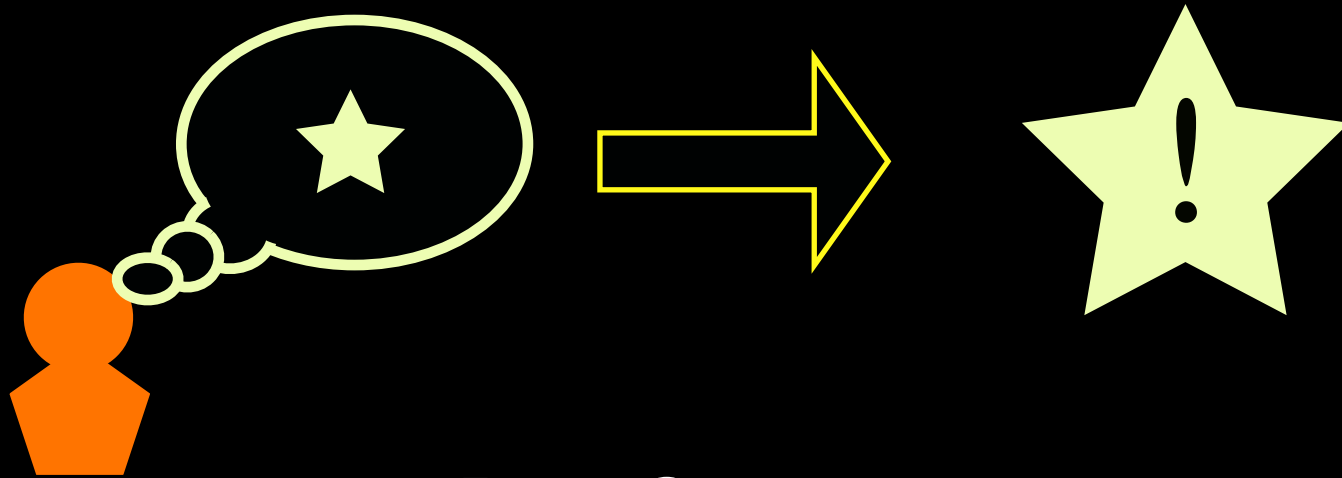
For example: There was a time in my life when I wanted to be a writer, and I engaged communities of writers. I found out where the writing groups and poetry slams were in my city, I took workshops with other young writers in the University area with mentors and teachers who were published writers. I read the publications, newsletters and journals. And I wrote, and shared my work with those around me. I became saturated with that culture.

>> This meaning builds over time, and becomes a sort of artifact of my history.

If I'd been alone on an island, I wouldn't have had that mutual engagement that reinforced to me what writing meant to me, or what certain writing techniques and forms meant, or which were contemporary or which were archaic. It was only through participation in a community of practice that I gained all those kinds of meaning.

[NOTE: this is a highly specious simplification of Wenger's work; please read “Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity” from Cambridge University Press for a full understanding of these ideas. I'm paraphrasing as best I can for the given topic.]

p 58 “CoP, LMI”



Reification

“We project our meanings into the world
and then we perceive them as existing in the world,
as having [an independent] reality of their own.”

- Wenger

Another important concept from Wenger’s work is his use of the concept of “Reification.”

>> As we said, as an individual, I participate in the world around me.

>> And as I participate, I make meaning -- through “negotiation” and participation -- a history of mutual engagement.

>> Reification is when I project my meaning and perceive it as a real thing in the world --

>> an object that exists independent of me.

Which is essentially what Wenger says: “We project our meanings into the world and then we perceive them as existing in the world, as having [an independent] reality of their own.”

This is one of those concepts that, once you get it, you start seeing it **everywhere.**

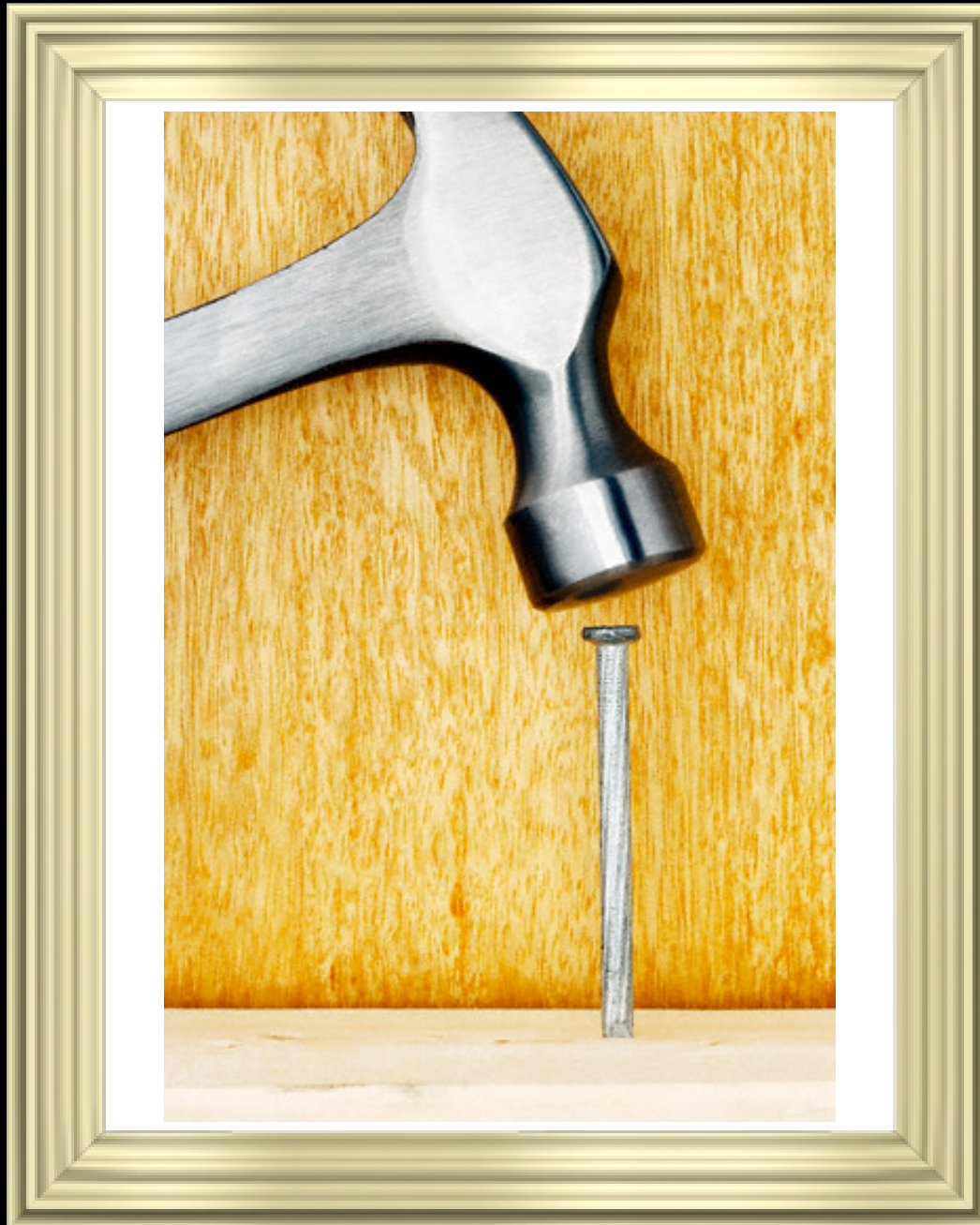
Have you ever learned a new theory of something? Like, you read Freud or Marx in college and suddenly it explains **everything*?* You run around breathlessly explaining to everyone else: look this explains why I hate my job! or why I hate my parents!

Then you read Jung or Maynard Keynes and suddenly the world turns upside down and now **that** explains everything!

As a writer, I experienced this. I was in a community of fairly traditional academic “lyrical” poets who wrote the kind of poetry you see in the New Yorker or the Atlantic and in most academic literary journals. And it made it very easy to think of **that** style of poetry as “POETRY” -- that there really wasn’t any other kind that was relevant or that really even counted as the same thing.

Problem was, there is a whole west-coast movement of something called Language Poets that eschewed the lyrical sensibility. Then there is also an urban movement of street poetry, like the stuff you see on HBO’s Def Jam Poetry. And there are also hold-outs who still write very Beat-like poems as well as little suburban writing circles that write in a style that all the others tend to roll their eyes at.

Each of these communities, even though they’re all communities of poets, tends to think of itself as a primary frame of reference, and that everybody else just “doesn’t get it.”



That's a species of reification. The feeling that, now I'm a hammer, and everything looks like a nail.

>>When the fact is, it's just a framework -- one of many -- for seeing the world. It helps us make sense of the world for certain purposes, but it's not the one and only objective frame.

We sometimes talk of the 'reification fallacy' -- where this kind of thinking can cause logical error. And sometimes it can and can be very counterproductive.

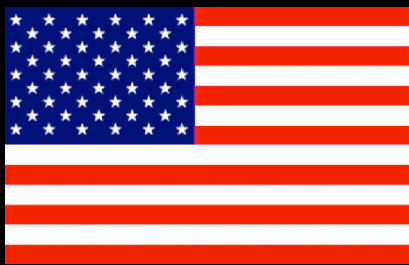
But it's also necessary -- it's how we make language, how we come to agree on what things are, what words mean, and everything else that makes us what we are.



“The Economy”



“Hollywood”



“The Flag”

The only reason why I can say “the economy” and all of you recognize what I’m talking about is reification. There really is nothing I can point at or put my hands on that is the entire “economy” -- but we still think of it as an entity.

>>When we say “Hollywood” what do we mean? Is it that sign? No... it’s the collective entity that we all project out there as a particular bundle of mutually negotiated meaning that includes everything from the movie industry to celebrities to the news media about it.

>>One issue that comes up every election cycle is a constitutional amendment protecting “the flag” -- but what is “the flag?” Is there one uber-flag? No... it’s what that design represents that matters, but it’s not hard for people to slip into thinking of the flag as the thing itself.

Even the diagrams I’m using in this presentation are reifications -- necessary to getting the point across in limited time, but highly impoverished symbols of the complexities they represent.

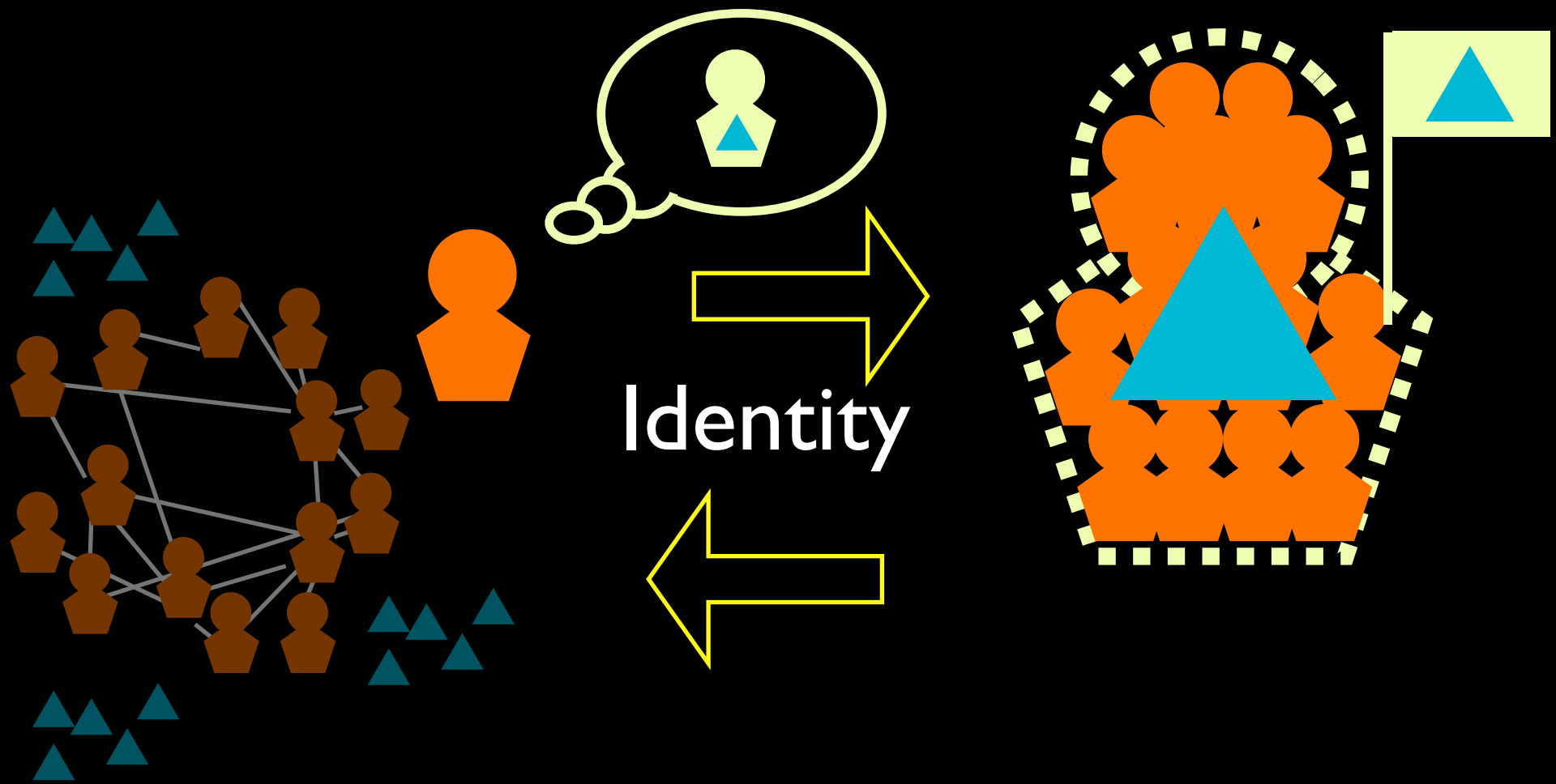
So it’s a troubling feature of being human: we’re pattern-making creatures, and we hold tight to those patterns. They’re what we use to survive and get on about the planet -- and yet they also sit at the root of wars, oppression and dysfunction.

Reification: you can’t live with it, you can’t live without it.

(c
hollywood sign: <http://www.seeing-stars.com/Images/slides/HollywoodSign2.JPG> (c gary wayne)

Participation

Reification



Practice

Discipline

I've wondered a long time why these debates in our circles generate such emotional responses -- but now I think I understand it. Our practices, and everything about them, go to the very core of our identities.

>> And in a community or practice, we identify with tools we tend to use in their practice

>> we often project ourselves that way -- "I am a part of X group that uses Y tools."

I've met many graphic designers who are Illustrator virtuosos. They wield that tool the way a sculptor wields a chisel.

So it's natural to tend to think of Illustrator virtuosity as a sign of design ability. Especially if you were educated and cut your teeth in a design community that was primarily about graphic design.

But then when they run into somebody who mainly uses Visio and controlled vocabularies, or someone who uses Dreamweaver and Fireworks for most of their work, it's a little disorienting.

>> Collectively, we tend to project not only ourselves as individuals this way -- but the whole of our community.

This is a natural progression, and it describes what has happened with all professions over history. And it explains how we end up with so much dogma and argument over definitions and territory. Because it's so deeply linked to how we identify ourselves, and how we make meaning in the world.

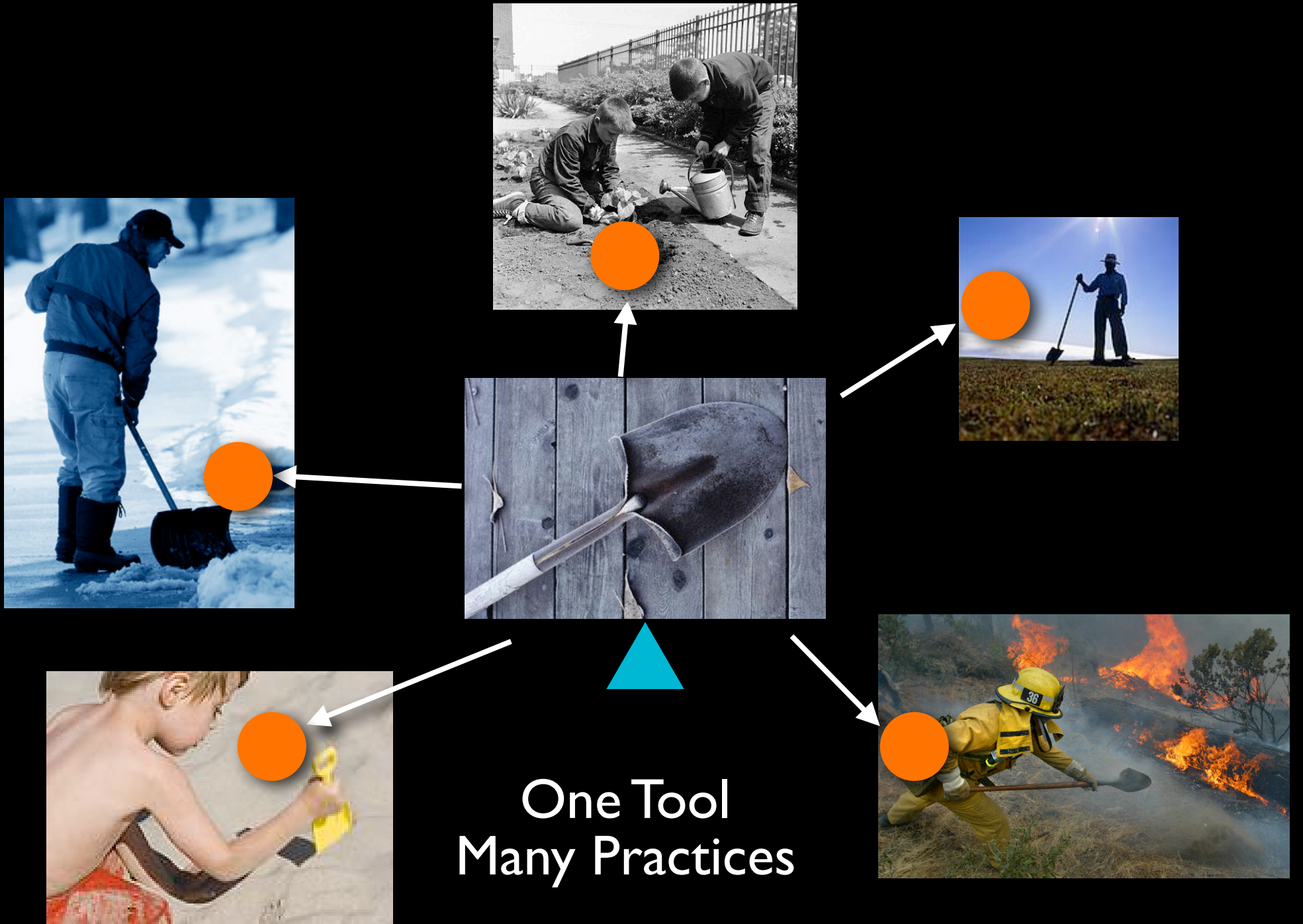
>>Our tools (including methods, terms of art, etc) become our 'flags' that we hold aloft to represent our identities -- individually and as communities. To hear someone else using words, tools and methods that we tend to think of as representing our identity feels threatening.

>> This interplay between Participation and Reification is a core synergy that makes communities of practice work.

>>And it's where we develop our sense of Identity as practitioners. As well as where Practice and Discipline emerge.

Hence the problem of the word "designer" -- there are numerous communities that use the term in different ways.

It's easy to feel threatened, and angry, when you feel that something you and your community have forged through a mutual history is being appropriated by outsiders.



One Tool Many Practices

A Practice is Not Defined by its Tools.

The world is changing in a way that doesn't allow us to be so comfortable with our assumptions. We're having to work together a lot more often.

Part of working better together is understanding that our methods and tools don't belong solely to our practice.

To illustrate this, let's look at the lowly shovel.

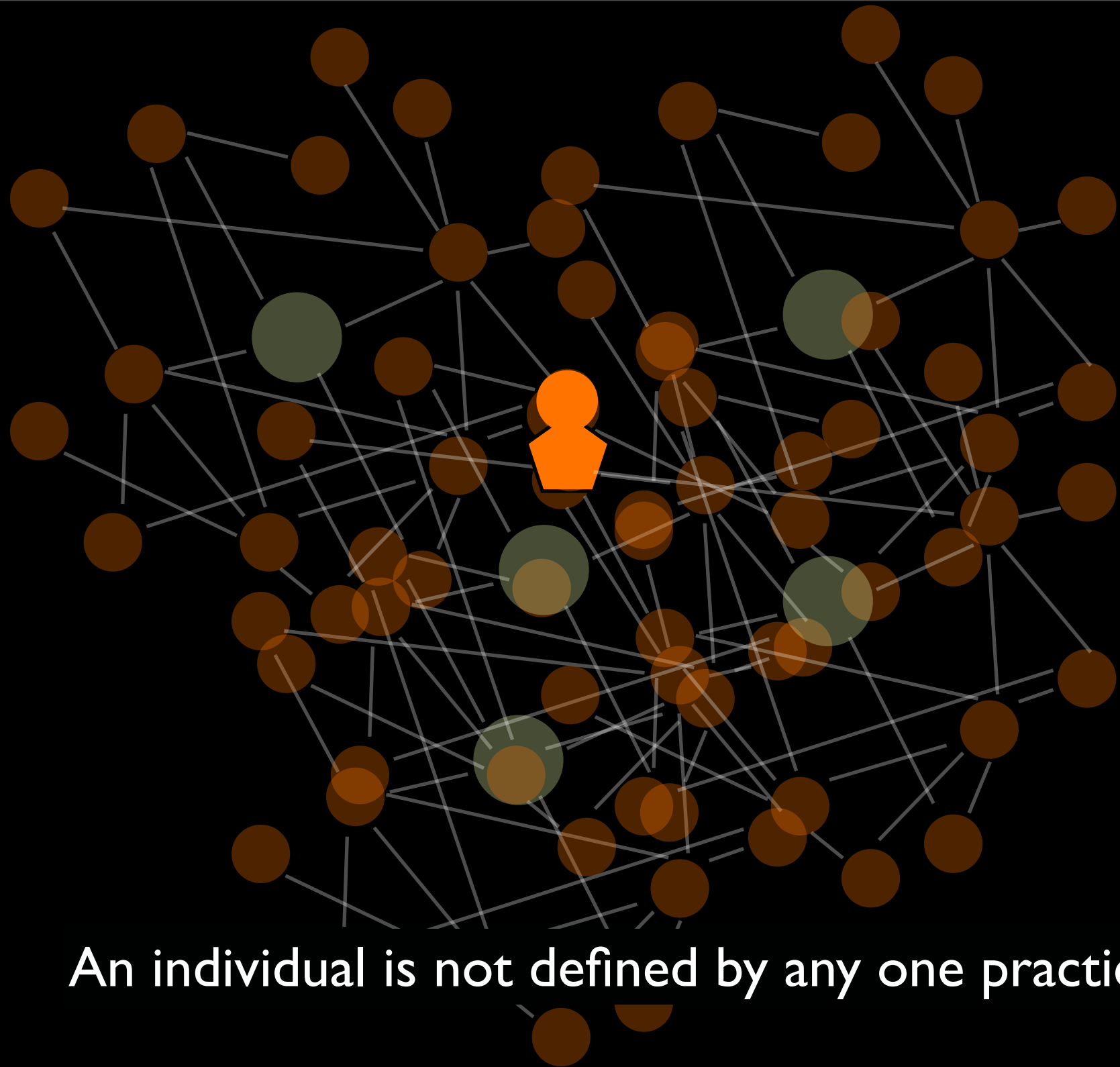
>> Here are some kids using a shovel to plant a flower. Does that mean that the shovel is all about flower planting? Not necessarily.

>> This same tool is useful in many other practices. From farming to firefighting to sandcastles and shoveling snow. The kids gardening aren't going to beat up the kid in the sand just because they think he shouldn't be using a shovel too.

>> A PRACTICE is not defined by its tools, only by its domain.

But of course this is harder in user-experience design, because we all work together and our work overlaps so much.

So the question for us shouldn't be "who" does wireframes, but why. That is, what is it about our domain that wireframes as a tool helps us to figure out.



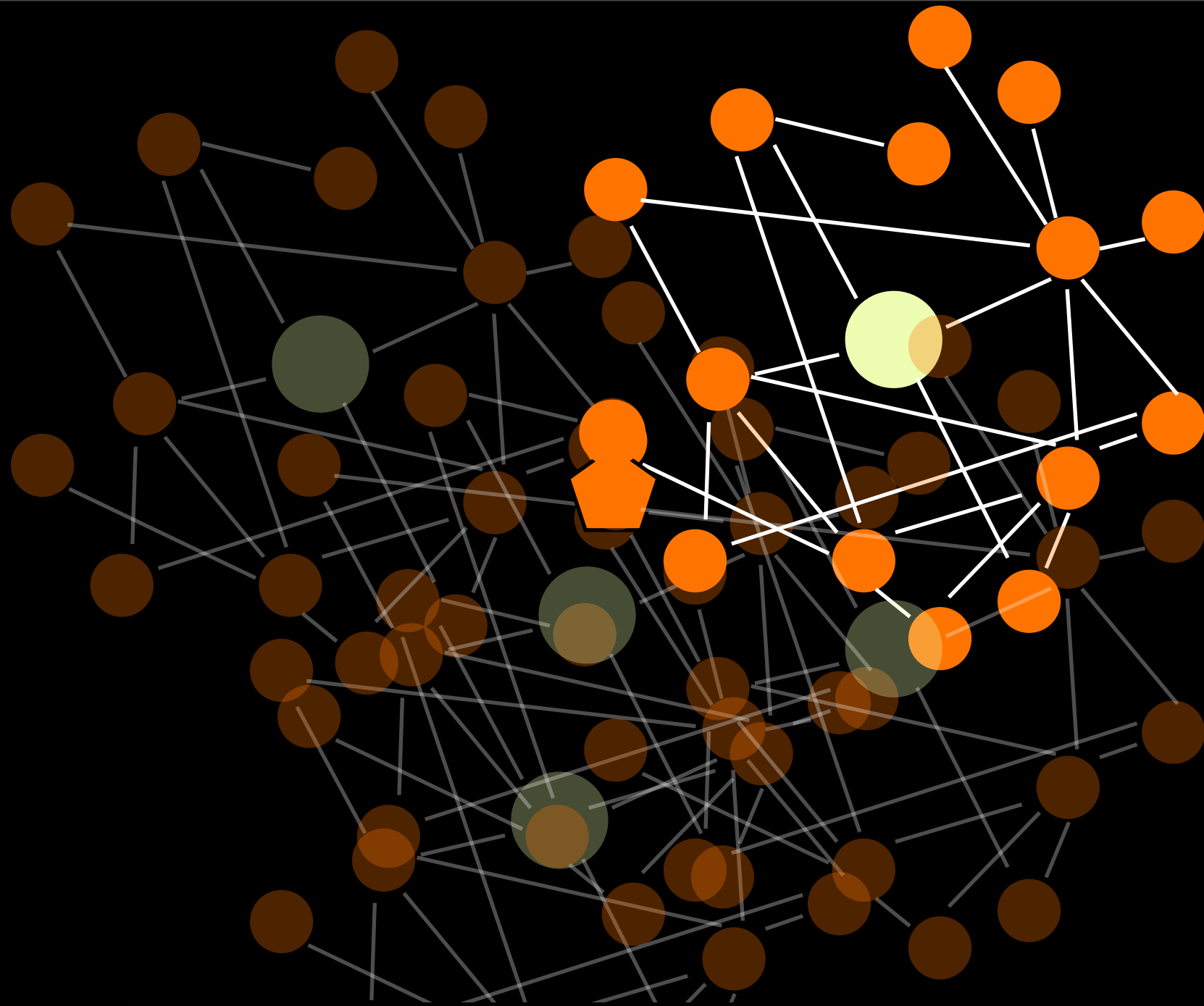
An individual is not defined by any one practice.

We tend to identify ourselves with a particular practice because it fits our need to reify -- to focus down to one thing we can point to and say "this is me."

That's not inherently bad. But the world doesn't work that way.

>>We need to understand that, in fact, we're swimming in a sea of practices and communities.

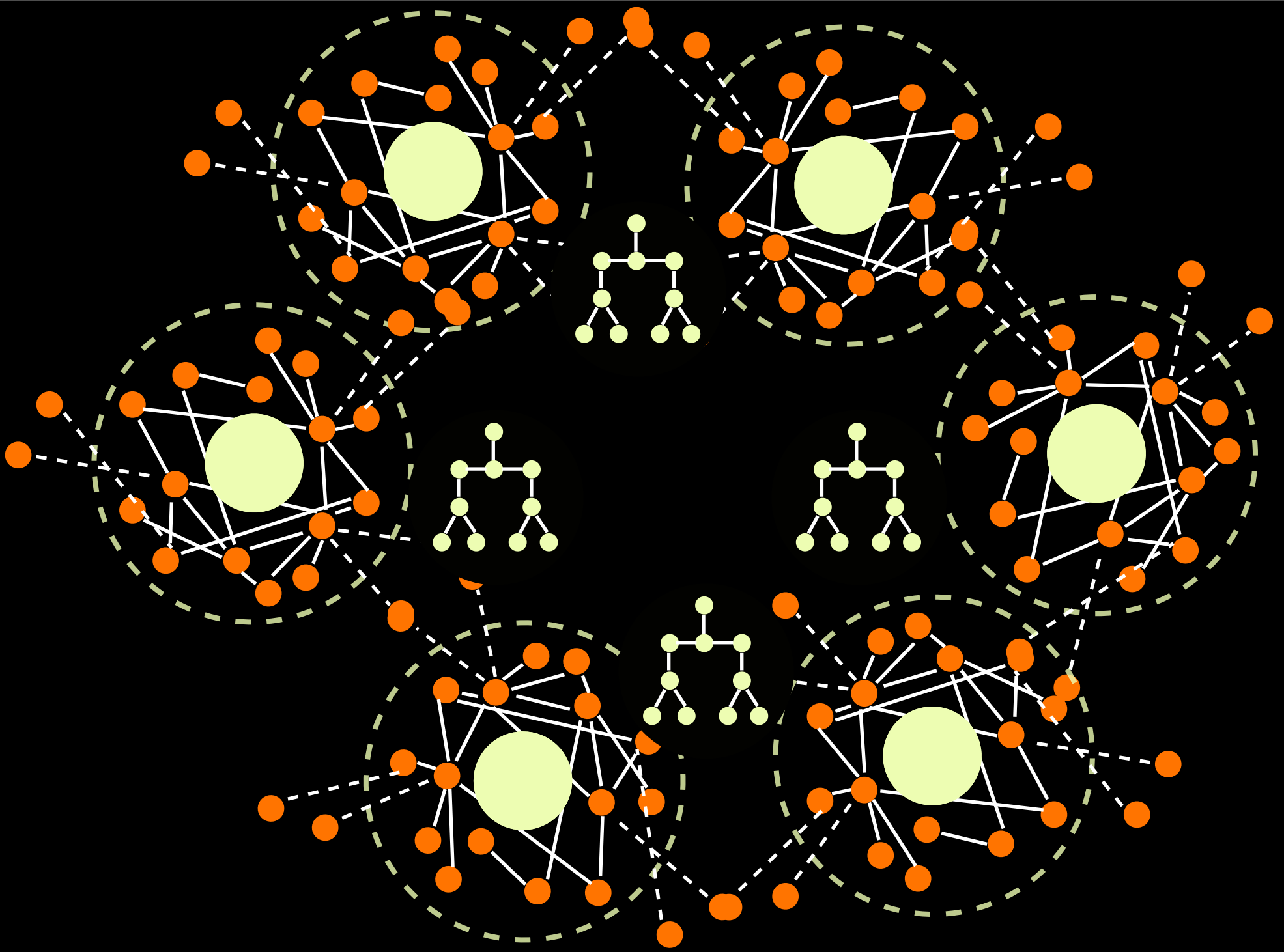
Wenger, CoP LMI - p 159



But we typically want to identify with one.

But it feels better to identify with one, and so we do.

The trick is to keep some perspective, and remember that the lines are not **really** drawn so clearly.



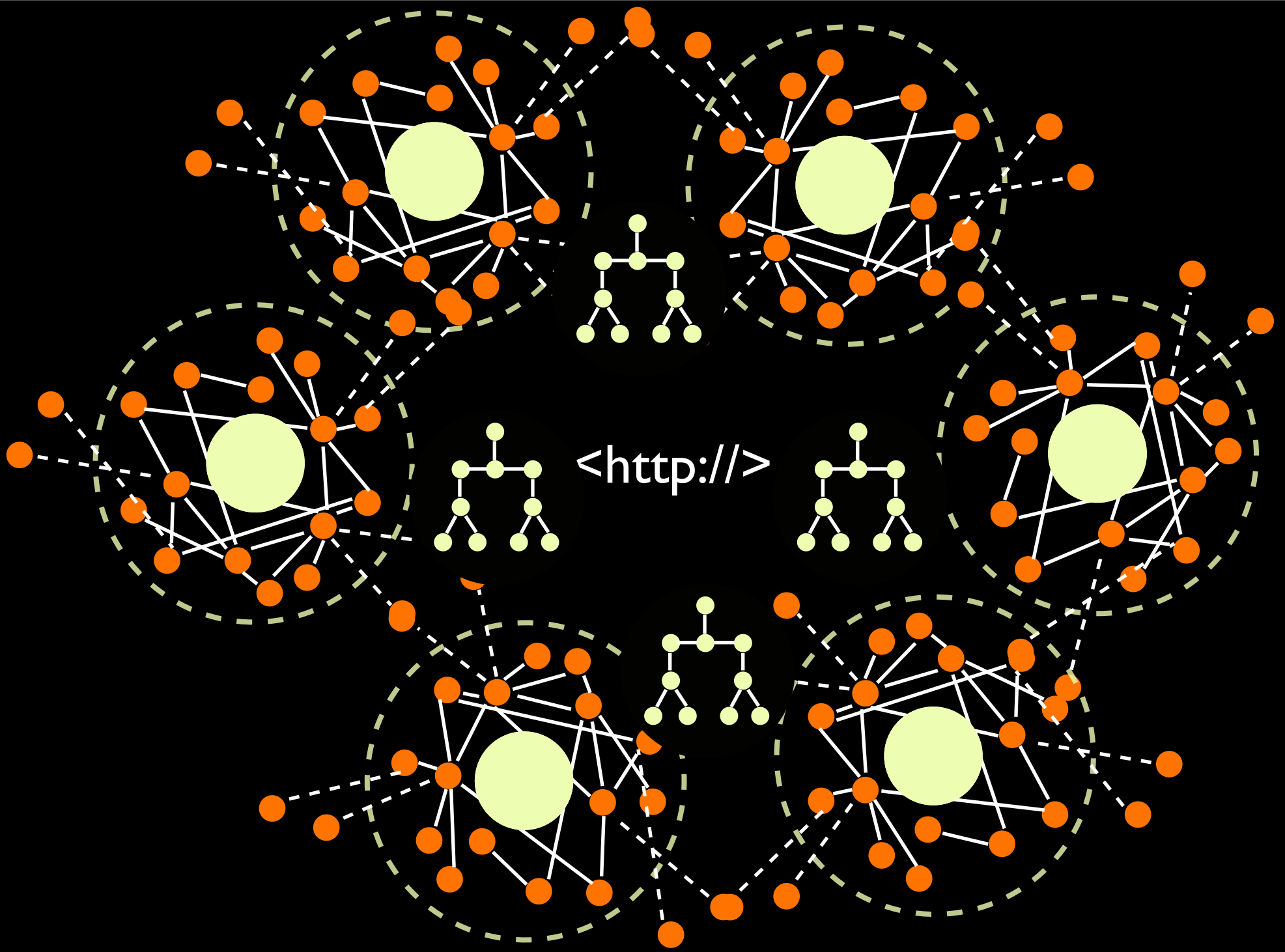
It begs the question: why is it such an issue right now, among “user experience” professionals, this clashing of disciplines?

Well, the practices represented by all of us here have always been interconnected.

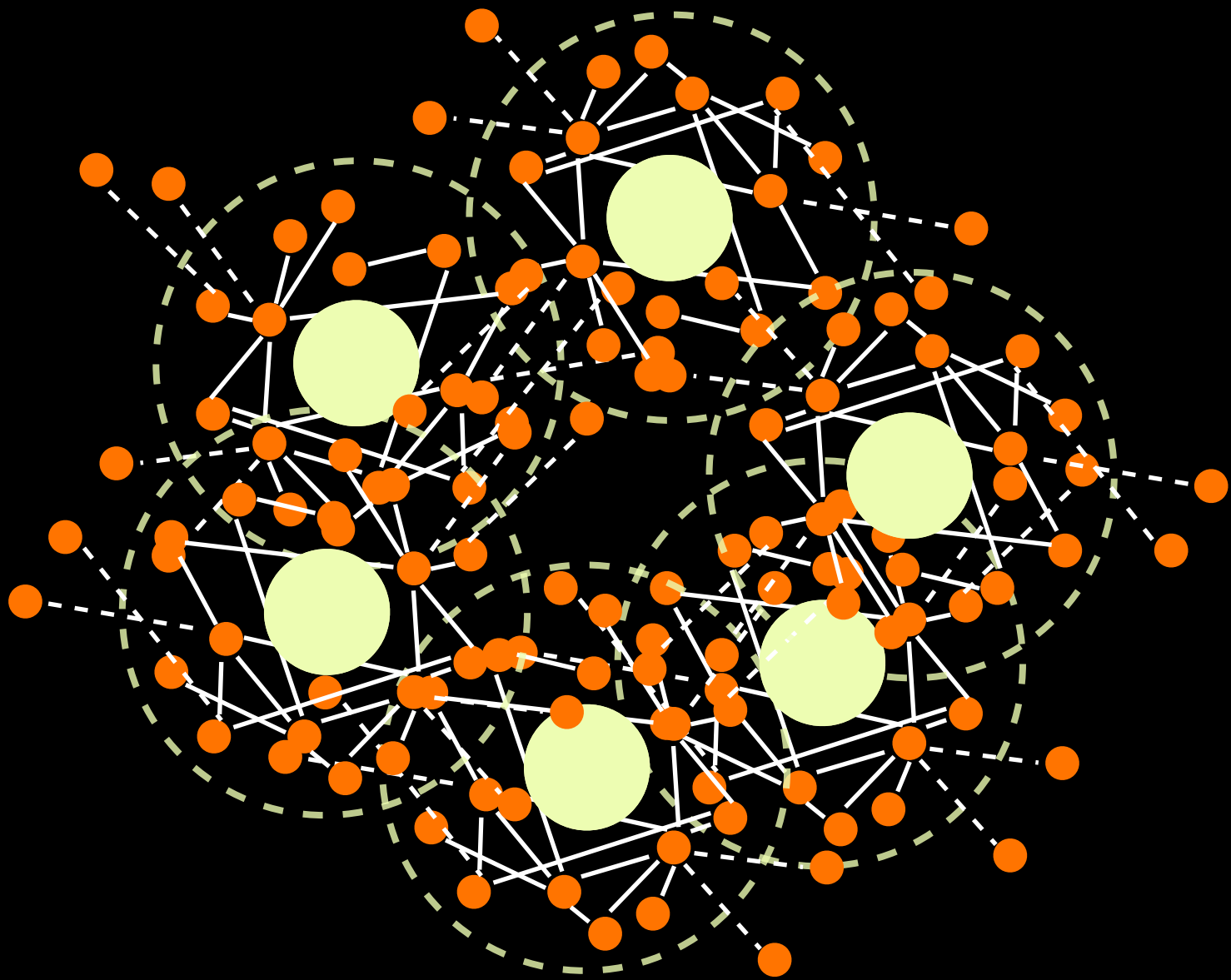
But for generations, the world was structured enough that we could more easily see ourselves as being in separate, independent disciplines.

The institutions we were part of -- companies, departments, universities -- were the only infrastructure we had to communicate, collaborate and learn from one another. Specialization further ‘ghettoizes’ these practices into highly granular disciplines that delve deeper and deeper, but often don’t see beyond their own boundaries.

But something has happened just in the last 10 years or so that has caused so much of this distance to shrink, and for these networks to converge.

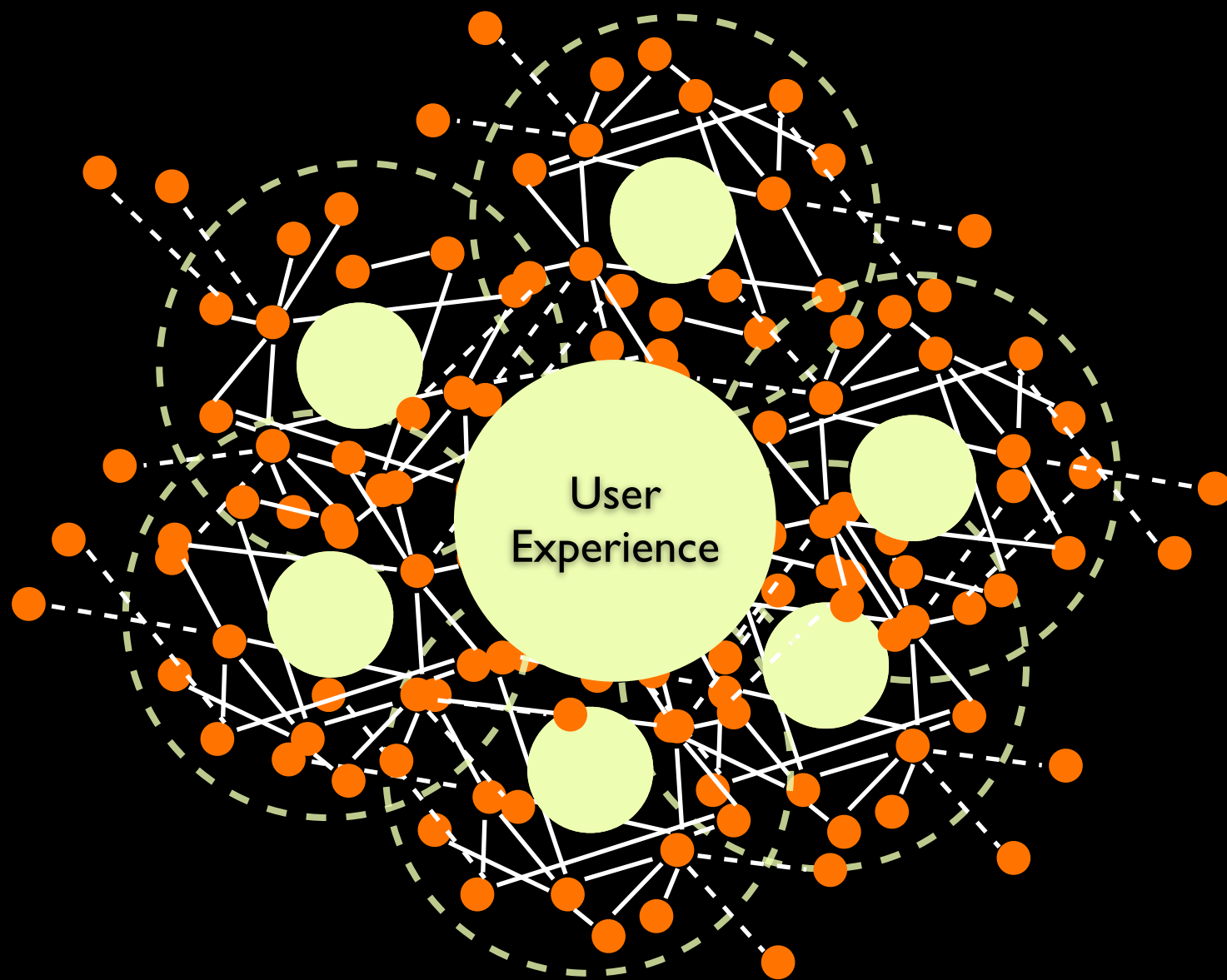


I happen to think that with the advent of the Web -- and the explosion of communication and social technologies like it, that have effaced the old time and space divisions we once assumed -- our comfortable, imagined membranes of separation have collapsed around us.



And we've ended up here. Mashed together.

>> The way I see it, we're now in the middle of a Meta Practice that we're calling User Experience.



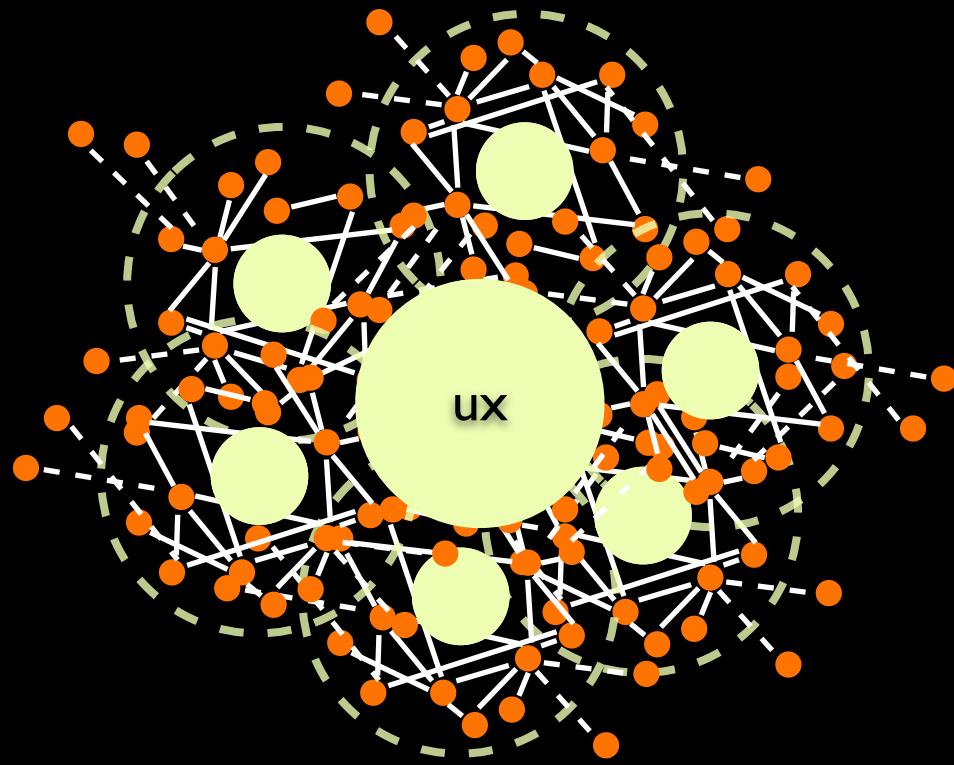
User Experience as Meta-Practice

This doesn't take the place of the related practices in any way. All of them are necessary -- and undoubtedly more of them will be in the future -- in order to support this highly complex, new-in-the-world activity.

It's not definable in a sense of "discipline" and it's not going to hold still for that. In fact, all of us are going to have to get used to our previously neat and tidy "disciplines" being a lot messier. But also a lot more exciting. The world is changing too fast to do otherwise.

Welcome to the User Experience MetaPractice. Let's continue the conversation!

Thank You



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