A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Like other growing things, communities of practice are not born mature. They must go through growing pains of early development and often times the reason they stay together and thrive is not the reason they were started. In this poster session, we will show the stages of progression, the significant transformations, and the way in which the Science Mathematics Association of Rural Teachers (SMART) Community of Practice (COP) was started, how it grew and why it now thrives. As a community begins, the key domain issue it faces is defining the scope of the domain in a way that elicits the heartfelt interest of members and aligns with the organization as a whole. The key community issue of finding people who share this common interest and trying to show them what thing could be like by sharing the knowledge. In addition, it is important to convince the participants that the potential for the discovery of new and better ways to approach a rural educational setting. A key factor is to find the common knowledge thread that exists. It is a balancing act between discovery and imagination. To build a community, it is important to find out who talks to who about what and to find out what is the blockage between communicating with others. In this discussion, we consider this community distributed because one cannot count on face to face encounters.

COP takes many shapes and forms. To get a good understanding of how a community of practice will function, it is important to understand the type of communities. Some of the questions that a community must address are: 1.) Will it be big or small? 2.) Will it be long-lived or short-lived? 3.) Will it be local, colocated or distributed? 4.) Will it be homogeneous or heterogeneous? 4.) What are the boundaries: Organizational Across Organizations, and how the organization of the community fits into the culture. 5.) Will the group be intentional or spontaneous? and finally will it be Unrecognized or Institutionalized.

The following factors are important in cultivating communities of practice: 1.) How does the community compare to other functional units? 2.) How does the community compare to other project or functional teams? 3.) How does the community compare to just informal networks.

It is important to have a practical model of community to guide the development and to understand the elements of the model. It was determined that there are some elements that are important. These elements are the domain, are there unique community elements, and how does the understanding of the practice affect the actual community.

It is important to understand the connection between knowledge creation, knowledge management and the process by which the community works.