Communities of Practice in Higher Education
A Guide for Facilitators

Contents

Introduction

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are a great way to enable learning and provide support to colleagues in higher education. This guide is for anyone new to facilitating a CoP.

The content for this guide has been written collaboratively between Communities of Practice (CoP) facilitators at the Technological University Dublin and the University of Adelaide. It is based on the guidance previously provided by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

This guide focuses on CoPs which are supported financially and/or administratively by a higher education institution. For the purposes of this guide, it is assumed that the process of establishing a CoP on a particular topic has begun and therefore this guide aims to assist new facilitators in getting started with their first meeting and building membership. In this guide the term facilitator is used for the people that both instigate a CoP and facilitate meetings. In some settings this might be different people.

What are Communities of Practice?

Communities of Practice (CoPs) can be known by different names, such as Faculty learning communities or professional learning communities, but the underlying idea is the same: groups of people coming together to share and learn about a topic in which they all have an interest[i].

Communities of Practice are groups of people who are passionate about a certain area of their practice and meet regularly to learn more about and enhance this practice.

CoPs have been shown to harness the benefits of social learning in a wide range of professional settings including higher education. CoPs can meet online or in the same physical space, but they need to meet regularly to maintain connection and momentum.

What are the benefits of CoPs?

Here are some of the reasons why facilitators find CoPs worth the investment of time and effort.

To make connections across large institutions	To work with colleagues in a range of roles and services	For synergy: can achieve more together	To hear about effective practice from elsewhere	For brainstorming
To access professional development opportuntiies	So other members of staff can tap into the experitse of CoP members	To build new knowledge together	They help build expertise	They can be interdisciplinary
To build new networks	They are more flexible and effective than other more formal methods	You can work with people with a shared interest	They are a safe environment	For launching new technologies
For building more effective communication networks	To share ideas and demonstrate practice	You can opt in and out depending upon other committments	Both personal and group needs can be fulfiled	For some teaching and learning problem solving

Starting your CoP

The three main structural elements of CoPs are:

Domain: the topic about which the group is passionate and wants to learn more about.

Practice: there needs to be space for sharing of the practice related to this domain and a focus on enhancing that practice.

Community: in order for members to feel safe enough to share their practice, trust and respect need to be built.

When a CoP is started, the facilitators will have decided perhaps alone or with a small core group of members, what the domain will be. The facilitator then needs to plan the activities of the CoP to enable community to be built and practice to be shared.

It is a good idea to check if there are already groups working in the areas you are interested in. This will help you consider if your CoP is going to offer something different that will attract enough members to be sustainable. You should also check if the CoP aligns to the strategic objectives of the institution, school, faculty or other area. This will help people see the purpose of the CoP and enable value creation.

Goal setting

An important first step is to collaboratively identify goals for the CoP. This could be formalised in a charter for your CoP which can assist prospective members in deciding if the CoP is for them. These could be defined for the short, medium and longer term.

Advice from CoP facilitators
- The level of formality in setting up of your CoP may depend on the size and drive; an overly prescriptive approach may deter a CoP from getting off the ground.
- Ensure your CoP's goals are based on common needs and interests and that there is agreement on a clear purpose and how you will work together.
- You could define the types of topics that the CoP will cover as well as those that are 'out of scope'.
- Ensure there is a shared understanding of how trust is built, the conversations that can take place, and how the CoP is a 'cone of silence' for some conversations.
- Determine the general format that will apply for most meetings, for example, a 15 minute catch up about what members have been up to, then 45 minutes for a guest presenter and 30 minutes for sharing practice.

Identifying leaders and their responsibilities

A successful CoP needs to be facilitated by someone who brings passion and leadership skills. As this role is usually voluntary, and as a form of succession planning, it can be helpful to have co-facilitators to share the load. The CoP members can also be active participants by taking on responsibilities for a range of important activities such as managing the storage of any resources created or shared by the CoP, making sure new members are introduced and connected to existing members, coordinating communication among CoP members, suggesting and sourcing guest speakers or contributors, or managing any digital platforms the CoP uses to complement synchronous meetings[ii].

Advice from CoP facilitators
- Leaders need to meet initially to identify the topics to be covered and then be ready to adjust these depending on current relevance, need and climate.
- Consider what core set of tasks are needed to keep the group active, and who is best placed to take responsibility for each of these.
- One or two people could be allocated tasks like sending reminders and an agenda a week before the meeting.

Using communication and collaboration tools

Before you start recruiting members you will need to know what type of communication and collaboration tools you will use to support your CoP's synchronous and asynchronous activities. Determine where your CoP will meet – in a

physical location, online, in a hybrid mode or a combination. How will this effect members' involvement and the building of community? How will the technological aspect be managed?

Advice from CoP facilitators

- You might want to consider rotating meeting times to be more accommodating of people's differing schedules.
- Make sure you understand the different purposes of various channels and how your institution will support you in promoting your CoP and its activities. For example, is it possible to have announcements on the institutional website? Is there a special webpage for CoPs? Which communication channels and platforms are available to your CoP without extra cost?
- You can brand your CoP to give it a distinct identity and if you can have members beyond your institution, you might want to use social media to enable engagement.
- Be prepared to handle ongoing management of agendas, minutes and action items. A CoP is not a committee, but you will need a way to record decisions, actions, and communicate these so people who miss a meeting won't be left out.
- Make sure you have an identified CoP space where potential members can find out more and existing members can catch up.

CoP meetings

Preparing for the first meeting

The first meeting is a chance for members to get to know each other, discuss and set shared goals, and agree on priorities. Regular meetings will provide opportunities to work on domain knowledge, share practice and build a sense of community.

Advice from CoP facilitators

- Make some space for participants to contribute to the direction of the CoP so they feel like protagonists in its creation and direction.
- Survey or ask the members to find out what they want to achieve, do and learn and how they want to operate, for example, the frequency of meetings.
- Plan the first session with opportunities to understand what the CoP is about and what it wants to achieve.
- You can use icebreaker activities for members to introduce themselves and why they joined the CoP.
- Create a sense of an 'inaugural event'.
- Set goals and direction but ensure these are loose enough for new members to pop in and out without feeling lost or behind.

Ongoing maintenance

You will need to ensure both meetings and the time in between meetings maintain connection and momentum.
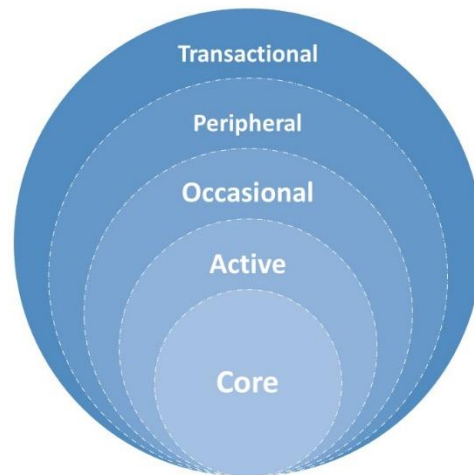
Advice from CoP facilitators

- Plan a series of meetings early and get them in people's calendars.
- Develop a plan for how to make good use of people's time in the meetings.
- Include food/beverages to allow people to chat, meet and collaborate.
- Distribute an agenda and establish meeting etiquette.
- Include time for practice exchange so members can share and obtain feedback.
- Find a way to keep communication going, for example, an online platform, discussion forums, regular emails. You want to keep people connected and sharing ideas and thoughts.
- The online space can be an important way for members to contribute, particularly if they are not yet comfortable sharing in meetings.

Building your CoP

Participating in a CoP is voluntary; therefore, a facilitator must ensure there are opportunities for new and existing members to engage in ways that they value.

It helps to consider the varying levels of participation people may have with your CoP because membership is voluntary and the domain or the value derived from membership will not be relevant or valuable to all people all of the time. People may move across levels of participation depending on their needs and context. This is a visual representation of this idea based on categories defined by [Beverley Wenger-Traynor](#).

Encourage membership

Advice from CoP facilitators

- Hold launch events with presenters to advertise your CoP.
- Word-of-mouth is a powerful recruiter.
- Explicitly inform people that membership is flexible for example, not everyone has to take an active role or attend every meeting, and that 'peripheral lurkers' are just as welcome.
- Communicate the expectations around sharing knowledge and achieving goals.
- Have a public 'member directory' so people can contact individuals outside of sessions for subject-matter expertise, discipline-focussed advice.

Create value

Belonging to a CoP can offer varying types and levels of value for members. One approach[iii] considers CoPs to enable:

- Immediate value, for example, time to interact with colleagues
- Potential value, for example, knowing someone who you could follow up with about teaching challenges
- Applied value, for example, an idea that is used to change teaching practice
- Realised value, for example, changes to practice that have enhanced student learning
- Reframing value, for example, a change in the way you evaluate what successful learning and teaching looks like

Advice from CoP facilitators

- Invite external speakers or organise a showcase event to demonstrate the value of membership more widely.
- Arrange training sessions for members, for example, on an e-learning technique or invite a facilitator for a workshop of value to the core membership.
- Find ways to seek and value everyone's ideas and opinions, for example, a discussion board in a web platform or schedule in space following or during meetings.

- Enable access to subject matter expertise, for example, recordings or pdfs uploaded into a web platform or shared folder and ensure these are accessible and inclusive following Universal Design for Learning principles.
- CoPs can act as an informal and internal benchmarking exercise for example, when members realise that others are doing certain activities which aren't currently part of their practice but could be.
- You need to ensure there is a balance of structured sessions with 'food and fellowship' to foster collegiality, conversation and networking.
- Make sure that CoPs are promoted through institutional committees, communications and structures and recognised within institutional strategies.

Questions to consider when setting up CoPs in the higher education context

- What does it mean to be a practitioner in this context?
    - Does practice have to be something core to an individual's formal role?
    - Can the domain be a peripheral research interest?
- How open will your CoP be?
    - Will you include both academic and professional staff?
    - Will students be invited as members or involved in another way?
    - Can staff or students from other institutions join?
- What kinds of outputs will the group focus on?
    - What are the outputs and outcomes the CoP sponsor or funding body will expect to see?

This guide is intended to be iterative and therefore feedback and ideas are most welcome and can be sent to teachexcellence@adelaide.edu.au

[i] Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015) *An introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses*. Available from authors at **https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice**.

[ii] Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2020). Learning to make a difference: Value creation in social learning spaces. Cambridge University Press.

[iii] Wenger, E., Trayner, B., & De Laat, M. (2011). Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: A conceptual framework. Rapport 18. Heerlen: Open Universiteit, Ruud de Moor Centrum.