

# Communities of Practice

A Facilitation Guide





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## Purpose and Goals of Communities of Practice

What is a community of practice (CoP)? Simply put, it is a group of people who share an area of inquiry and engage in collective learning about that issue as it relates to their work or practice. Through discussions, shared experiences, and relationship building, the community of practice develops a shared and individual repertoire of resources, skills, and knowledge to use in their practice. Building knowledge in a CoP is a collective process, made all the more impactful by drawing on the combined knowledge of all participants. Communities of practice exist everywhere; from formalized meetings to informal lunch discussions among peers, they create connections between people, facilitate sharing knowledge, and lead to shared practices.

While CoPs can take many forms, the University of Minnesota's Office for Public Engagement and Minnesota Campus Compact began sponsoring a particular kind together in 2016. In 2017, Iowa Campus Compact and Wisconsin Campus Compact joined the collaboration. This facilitation guide grew out of 12 CoP's convenings over those two years.

The goals of the communities of practice initiative include:

- 1) Enhancing individuals' capacity to do community engagement work in higher education;
- 2) Developing collaborative relationships across the Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin Campus Compact networks;
- 3) Harvesting resources, research findings, program models, insights, webinars, conference sessions, etc., to share with those beyond a specific community of practice; and
- 4) Building the field's knowledge about communities of practice as a model for professional development.

## Community of Practice Model

The CoP model combines elements of learning, practice, and community. Together, these interact so that *shared learning in community informs practice*. CoPs balance an emphasis on each of these, giving as much attention to building relationships as to thinking and doing. In this way, CoPs are designed to function differently than most dominant cultural modes of work, where action may be prioritized over relationships or reflection.



This model can manifest in a wide variety of forms and practices. Some options to discuss when forming a CoP include:

- Ongoing vs. time-bound in duration
- Static vs. changing membership
- Co-facilitation vs. individual
- In-person vs. online gatherings (or a combination thereof)
- Structured vs. unstructured conversations
- Public vs. private locations

A community of practice is what its participants want it to be; there is no prescribed way of doing things and a wide variety of options exist for running a group.

### What's Special about CoPs?

Communities of practice differ from other groups in the level of participation expected from participants. All members of a CoP are to be *equal* participants, regardless of their educational background, role, or institutional type; the participants bring their own goals and help to shape the meetings. Facilitators usually also participate in discussion, both contributing to and learning from the group. This structure differs from a learning environment which relies on a teacher or an expert and may therefore feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable to some facilitators or participants. In a CoP, participation is also voluntary – the participants *chose* to engage in shared learning on that topic. The facilitators have a special responsibility to create and protect this co-creative and participatory space. We've articulated these ideas in part through the help of [Here We Are: Building Our Community for All](#): a manual for study circle leaders published by the Freedom House Southern Africa with the help of Marie Ström.

By meeting multiple times over months or even years, participants get to know one another on a deep level, can apply what they learn and report back to the group for additional learning, can develop new partnerships or resources on complex issues, and more.

### When Is a CoP a Good Fit?

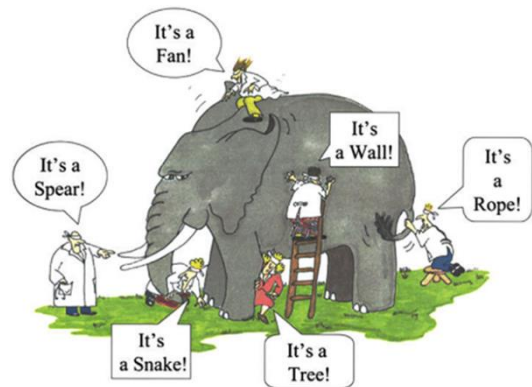
A Community of Practice is most appropriate for a group that wants to develop new knowledge together. It is not a training, work group, or task force, but a group of people seeking to explore aspects of their work that do not have simple answers. The size of a CoP can vary, but groups from 5-10 people generally work best. CoPs do tend to be particularly generative when they can bring together those with a range of perspectives.

## What's the Culture of a CoP?

A CoP is based on an open, democratic way of working and learning. Everyone in the CoP has knowledge to share; at the same time, everyone has learning to do. People bring many identities and ways of knowing to the conversation, and each person's knowledge is valuable. Because systems are so complex and interrelated, combining knowledge gives us a more complete understanding of the world in which we live and helps grow the ability to accomplish change.

Different perspectives and types of knowledge also enhance group learning. While we may only be able to understand an issue in one particular way with our individual lens, a group widens that perspective to create a deeper and richer conversation.

Each group will have its own dynamic culture based on the people in it and their larger contexts. Typically, a CoP is intended to be a space where all perspectives will be welcome and all people respected, while at the same time, participants are able to challenge each other's ideas, ask critical questions, and seek to understand but not necessarily agree.



## Facilitator Tips and Strategies

### Role of a Facilitator

A facilitator in a CoP is not a teacher, trainer, or presenter. Because a CoP is focused on building shared knowledge, the main role of the facilitator is to keep the group moving in its desired direction and maintain positive group dynamics while remaining a learner and an active participant. The facilitator should also encourage agency and mutual responsibility of all group members, ensuring that all participants recognize their role as an equal contributor to the process of working together to build shared knowledge. Other roles for the facilitator include keeping time, maintaining group focus, and encouraging participation. Depending on the structure of the CoP program, facilitators may also be responsible for organizing meeting logistics.

## Facilitator Roles during the Sessions

- Foster relationships among CoP members.
- Create a supportive and open group environment with mutual sharing. (See more info in the coming pages.)
- Summarize and clarify concepts and ideas from participants.
- Manage process and provide content for the sessions.
- Facilitate self and others – as an equal participant in the group, the facilitator should take steps to ensure that their voice does not dominate every conversation.
- Allow silence – some group members may take time to share their thoughts, so allowing silence is a good technique to avoid missing voices that are slow to contribute. If in doubt, count to 30 before moving on to the next idea.
- Invite feedback and participation from all group members.
- Restore safety/bravery – in some cases, sensitive topics or disagreement among group members can lead to loss of the open sharing atmosphere that the facilitator is working to build. In those cases, the facilitator should take steps to work through the issues that have come up and restore trust and openness.
- Spark explicit discussion of self-interest, power, culture, and roles at work in the group.

## Benefits of Co-Facilitation

It can be helpful to have a co-facilitator during the CoP. With more than one facilitator, it becomes easier to attend to the range of dynamics at work in the group and develop questions and prompts to advance the group's work together. It also presents a more diverse range of thought at the outset of the group and provides access to a larger arena of helpful resources and experiences. Furthermore, multiple facilitators can help each other by providing mutual support as they reflect on what's working well and strategize about what could be better or what next steps make sense. Finally, co-facilitators' behavior towards each other can help model and set the tone for collaborative, power-sharing relationships among group members.

## Experimentation and Failure

There is no such thing as failure for a community of practice. There are no predetermined outcomes – each group will evolve according to input from its participants. A key aspect of the CoP is that it remains a space to experiment and learn. This process is not easily controlled, so it is important to note any tension or stress that may arise from the group's growing process. Each CoP will ultimately be unique and have unique results that are appropriate for their group culture and focus.



## Stages of a Group

Groups, whether a CoP or any other, typically progress through three stages. Understanding the characteristics of each stage will enable CoP facilitators to adequately address its opportunities and challenges. The following tips and information on group stages are drawn from the third edition (2012) of *Understanding Group Dynamics* by R.W. Toseland and R.F. Rivas.

### 1

#### Beginning

This group phase typically only occurs during the first meeting or two. In this stage, group members may be nervous or anxious about what is to come. They have not yet built trust among the other members and may be wary or noncommittal. It is important during this stage for the group to form norms, begin to build trust, and establish its purpose.

#### *What the Group Needs:*

- Orientation to the group
- Norms and patterns
- A sense of shared purpose
- Recognition of commonalities and similarities

#### *How the Facilitator Can Help:*

- Provide structure and answer questions as necessary.
- Express confidence in the members and function of the group.
- Model norms for other group members.
- Make connections between members.
- Invite open conversation about one another's self-interests in joining this group.
- Help members establish shared purpose.
- Build a group contract with team norms and agreements (sample in Appendix A).
- Be an active participant in the session.

## 2

### Middle

Once members have begun to orient themselves to the group, established norms, defined their purpose, and recognized commonalities, the middle phase begins. This is the longest group stage. At the beginning of this stage, members are still exploring their roles and the role of others; by the end, each member should have found their unique place in the group as well as acceptance and understanding from the other participants. It is also during this phase that the participants begin to recognize the full value of the group, take risks, and more fully share their thoughts and vulnerabilities with others.

#### *What the Group Needs:*

- Group culture
- Mutual support among group members
- Patterns and structure (such as check-ins, pre-readings, etc.)
- Cohesion among members
- Experience of productive conversation

#### *How the Facilitator Can Help:*

- Become a fellow and equal participant in the group – don't dominate.
- Acknowledge and discuss power dynamics at work in the group and how they may impact participation.
- Help navigate and make sense of conflict, as needed.
- Encourage mutual support by promoting sharing from all participants.
- Promote flexibility and sharing from all group members (see tips on pages 11-12).
- Maintain adherence to group norms.
- Use examples, language, and questions that are broadly relevant to all members, regardless of role or institutional type.
- Point out and emphasize the value of the group's multiple perspectives.
- Use knowledge-building strategies on pages 10-11.

# 3

## End

This is the final group stage and typically begins a meeting or two before the end of a group's time together. At this point, the group has usually formed bonds and developed trust with one another. The facilitator can help prepare the group for closure through focusing on topics such as skills or lessons learned, ways to continue learning, or tangible goals for moving forward. Some group members may experience strong feelings around endings, and the facilitator can help navigate these by recognizing those feelings, reviewing group accomplishments, and beginning the process of closure well in advance of the final meeting.

### *What the Group Needs:*

- Time to prepare for the end of the group
- Positive reminders of accomplishments
- Collection of materials and resources into a harvest (See more on page 14)
- Goals moving forward

### *How the Facilitator Can Help*

- Plan for the end of the group in advance of the final meeting.
- Encourage review and evaluation.
- Highlight accomplishments.
- Lead group in explicit discussion of whether and how they want to stay connected after the close of the group.
- Consider how the group can best share what they've learned with others beyond the group.

## Opening the Session

There are many ways to help people enter the meeting ready to engage fully from the start. Setting an open and inclusive tone at the outset of the session will bring more voices to the CoP and ultimately improve everyone's experience. Below are some tips, strategies, and suggestions from past CoP facilitators about how to open the session effectively.

- Offer to be in the room 10 minutes before and 10 minutes after the session for people to stay early or linger with other questions.
- Prepare an agenda and send it out to all participants in advance, inviting feedback.
- Start with a poem or reading.
- Prepare attendees with the expectation of active participation.
- Ask an opening question around your topic or the attendees' reasons for joining this particular group.
- Begin with an activity, such as asking participants to bring an object representing why they do this work or naming communities to which they belong.
- Assign follow-up work and plan to discuss it as the opening of the subsequent session.
- Assign readings and compose opening discussion questions based on those readings.
- Begin by asking participants to reflect back on the previous session, which will help with continuity.

## Building Trust and Community

A CoP is defined by its open participation and the co-creative agency of all participants, so the facilitator must work to build an atmosphere of trust, honesty, and open sharing. Some activities suggested by past facilitators include:

- Model open and honest sharing with the group members by talking openly about your own work, experiences, goals, etc.
- Have a check-in at the beginning of each session. (See Appendix B for ideas.)
- Provide assignments between meetings:
  - written reflection on the CoP experience that is then shared among group members;
  - one-to-one conversations among participants; or
  - bring a resource to share/teach.
- If co-facilitating, debrief with one another after each call.

Tension over differences is not uncommon, nor necessarily destructive. Though uncomfortable, tension can also promote learning. Another role for the facilitator is to help the group members navigate tension in a healthy way through continuing to disagree respectfully, listening to one another's perspectives, remaining open to alternate viewpoints, and refraining from judgement. Maintaining this attitude towards tension will also help the group remain a place where all members feel free to assert their own knowledge, opinions, and experiences while upholding the respect and dignity of each individual in the group.

## Building Knowledge

Shared knowledge-building is another core aspect of any CoP. Group members will work together, using different perspectives and lenses to build deeper relationships, knowledge, and practice. The role of the facilitator here is to help that process through providing structure and activities that aid the group. Here are some exercises to use in a CoP meeting to build collaborative knowledge:

- Share principles, theories, or models and discuss how they play out in participants' contexts.
- Have participants share stories from their work and/or research that informs it and as a group, collectively derive principles for practice.
- Provide and discuss case studies or scenarios elucidating issues relevant to the group.
- Share and discuss resources such as videos and articles.
- Ask participants to reflect periodically on their practice through the lens of the CoP.
- Have participants meet one-on-one to interview each other between or during meetings.

## Eliciting Participation

Eliciting the participation of all group members is another key aspect of being a CoP facilitator. Participation is crucial for learning, yet prompting sharing can be difficult – some group members may dominate while others may be reluctant to share their point of view. This takes on an additional level of complexity if groups are meeting virtually. Below are some strategies, including probes adapted from the work of Mary Kennedy at Michigan State University (<https://msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/Research/interviewprobes.htm>):

- Use discussion probes to elicit further conversation, such as:
  - Clarify the meaning. (*What did you mean by that?*)
  - Get more details. (*Tell me more about that. Or, Can you give me an example?*)
  - Ask for their feelings or rationale. (*Why do you think you noticed that? Or, Why was that important to you?*)
  - Steer back to the main topic after digressions. (*How does this relate to our topic?*)
  - Use affirmations to encourage continued sharing. (*Uh-huh, yes, or and?*)
- In an online meeting context:
  - Allow pauses for participants to unmute.
  - Call on participants by name and/or use a mutual invitation model where the group leader speaks first, then invites another to share, who then invites another to share, and so on. People may pass if they choose to do so.
  - Use the chat box to share links to articles and resources. These can be downloaded.
  - Use a breakout room function to have small group conversations.
  - Use Google Docs. Share a document link in the chat box, or share the screen with the document loaded, then give a prompt in the Google Doc and allow all participants to type responses.

## Group Dynamics

As a group develops, group members may settle into certain regular behaviors. There are many positive contributions that group members can make, such as providing energy, giving constructive feedback, validating the roles and feelings of other group members, encouraging members to participate, etc. However, there are also some behaviors that may be more difficult to navigate in a group setting. If one or more group members exhibit these, it could introduce some difficulty into healthy group functioning. Some examples, drawn from the third edition (2012) of *Understanding Group Dynamics* by R.W. Toseland and R.F. Rivas, include:

- Gatekeeping -- creating insider/outsider subgroup dynamics
- Consistently taking charge and stifling other contributions
- Being defensive
- Rejecting group norms
- Excessively criticizing oneself or others
- Monopolizing or dominating the conversation
- Refusing to speak or contribute

If a facilitator recognizes the above or any other behaviors that are inhibiting group functioning, the following actions could help move the group in the right direction:

- Keep in mind that all behaviors have meaning.
- Point out the behavior (carefully).
- Ask the member displaying that behavior to explain their perception of it.
- Ask the other group members to describe their perception.
- Identify the feelings and point of view of all group members.
- Ask the member with the behavior to consider the perspective of others.
- Help all members consider how they react to the negative behavior and how they may change their reaction.
- Work with all members to change the dynamic at play.

## Results

### How Do CoPs Make a Difference?

Communities of practice make a real impact in people's professional practice and individual lives. Some of the direct impacts we have seen over the first years of this program include:

- Sustained accountability – to the goals of the CoP, and changed ways of thinking
- Connection across silos – expanding beyond departments, professions, or sectors
- New ways to collaborate – new connections have resulted in collaborative work, and
- Cross pollination of ideas – ideas and practices spread

### The Harvest

In order to maximize the value of the work taking place in these CoPs, groups can “harvest” knowledge or resources emerging from the group's work that could benefit others beyond the group. Harvests can contain individual or collective knowledge and contain a variety of resources on both the CoP process as a whole, the specific topic, or group functioning. Group members or facilitators can collect and distribute the resources to inform future projects, and spread the learning that has occurred to others who may benefit from it.

Some possible harvests may include:

- Share/post links to videos, articles, or other resources the group found particularly helpful.
- Create a list of other networks, organizations, or connections who are doing work or generating resources related to the CoP's topic.
- Provide a training or webinar to others on strategies, practice insights, or principles emerging from the group.
- Write a blog post or informal article on the CoP experience individually or collectively.
- Present at a conference.

## Appendix A: Sample Team Norms

These team norms are adapted from the UCSF Meeting Optimization Program’s SOM Culture of Leadership Initiative, a list of common norms from [highperformanceteams.org](http://highperformanceteams.org), and “Respect Differences? Challenging the Common Guidelines in Social Justice Education” by Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo. This list is extensive but not exhaustive; your group norms can be as in-depth or as broad as the CoP determines is necessary.

1. Treat each other with dignity and respect.
2. Differentiate between opinion—which everyone has—and informed knowledge, which comes from sustained experience, study, and practice.
3. Notice your own defensive reactions and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge, rather than as a rationale for closing off.
4. Recognize how your own social positionality (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, ability) informs your perspectives and reactions.
5. Be genuine with each other about ideas, challenges, and feelings.
6. Trust each other. Have confidence that issues discussed will be kept in confidence.
7. Do your best to actively participate in the sessions.
8. Facilitators will open up a space in which people have information and are comfortable asking for what they need.
9. Practice a consistent commitment to open and honest sharing of your experiences and ideas.
10. Listen first to understand, and don’t be dismissive of the input received when we listen.
11. Avoid territoriality; think instead of the overall good for all.
12. Don’t allow the discussion of issues, ideas, and direction to become a personal attack or return to haunt other members in the future.
13. Present problems in a way that promotes mutual discussion and resolution.
14. Be vulnerable and risk being wrong sometimes. Thoughtful discussion is expected.
15. Practice and experience humility – each of us may not have all the answers.
16. Promise to come prepared so that you demonstrate value and respect for the time and convenience of others.
17. Expend the effort to practice all of these norms and to care enough about the group and its work to confront each other, with care, compassion, and purpose, when a group member fails to practice these norms.
18. Observe confidentiality – nothing said in this group will be attributed to an individual in another setting.



## Appendix B: Discussion Activities

### I. Ice Breakers and Check-In Ideas

Check-ins are a great way to set the tone at the beginning of every session, ensuring each member has a chance to participate. They also center lived experience and root the group's work in the participants' humanity, rather than solely their ideas. Ice-breakers are also an option, which can invite levity into the group.

#### Check-In Prompts

- How have you seen this CoP showing up in your work or life lately?
- What is one thing sustaining you right now?
- If you had to give a weather report on your own life today, what would it be?

#### Ice Breaker Prompts

- Tell us a story about your name.
- What is one goal you'd like to accomplish during your lifetime?
- When you were little, who was your favorite superhero and why?
- Tell us about a unique or quirky habit of yours.
- Which three words describe you best?
- Which would you prefer — three wishes over five years or one wish right now?
- What is the oldest thing you own?
- What is your favorite sport to watch?
- If you had one free hour each day, how would you use it?

More ideas can be found at the following sites:

- <https://www.icebreakers.ws/small-group/icebreaker-questions.html>
- <https://funattic.com/76-fun-icebreaker-questions.htm>
- <http://www.signupgenius.com/business/icebreaker-questions.cfm>

## II. Circle of Voices

This activity can be found in *The Discussion Book: 50 Great Ways to Get People Talking* by Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill. It is an excellent and short exercise to elicit participation from all group members at the beginning of a session.

- Give a prompt.
- Provide participants 2 minutes to think on their own, then form a small group.
- 1<sup>st</sup> round: Each person responds. Keep it to 1 minute! No commentary. No response.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> round: Cross talk. Participants are only allowed to respond to what someone said in first round, and they have to start with either “I noticed” or “I wonder.”
- Closing: Any new perspectives or new questions?

## III. Photo Elicitation

- Lay out images for participants to view.
- Invite each person to choose one or two images that speak to them.
- Form groups of 3-4.
- In their groups, invite participants to review their collective images.
- Together, have groups choose one that reflects their sense of the issue you’re exploring.
- Have them discuss with one another what they see in the image that relates to the topic at hand.
- Return to the full group and have each small group present their image and why they chose it.
- A note taker can be collecting notes from each group, lifting up key themes and learnings.
- How to get images:
  - Magazines (free)
  - Purchase sets, e.g., [visualsspeak.com](http://visualsspeak.com), [solutions.ccl.org](http://solutions.ccl.org)

## IV. Body Parts Debrief

This exercise helps participants make meaning of a discussion or debrief a shared experience. See more at <https://www.trainingwheelsgear.com/collections/processing-tools/body>.

- **Eye:** What, if anything, do you see differently than you did before?
- **Ear:** What’s something someone else said that stuck with you?
- **Heart:** What emotional response did you have to this experience?
- **Stomach:** What’s something that took guts about this experience?
- **Brain:** What’s a thought or question you’re leaving with?
- **Hand:** What’s something you’d like to do differently because of this?
- **Smile:** Where do you find hope in this?

## Appendix C: Additional Resources

1. Game Storming: a collection of workshops with tools and strategies for examining things deeply, for exploring new ideas, for performing experiments and testing hypotheses, to generate new and surprising insights and results
  - <http://gamestorming.com/>
2. Civic Agency Workshops: a series of experiential workshops developing civic agency through strategies and skills related to “self,” “us,” and “now”
  - <http://mncampuscompact.org/resources/civic-leadership-development/>
3. Reflection Activities: reflective learning techniques compiled by Iowa Campus Compact
  - <https://www.slideshare.net/iacampuscompact/drake-reflection>
4. Cult of Pedagogy: an extensive list of class or group discussion strategies
  - <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/>

## **Final Acknowledgements**

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