

Guidelines for Establishing Communities of Practice



1. INTRODUCTION

Communities of Practice (COPs) is a term coined by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave to describe a 'community that acts as a living curriculum' for practitioners to learn from one another irrespective of their position within the organisation (Wenger, 2009). In the learning and teaching environment, COPs form when people join together to collectively learn about a shared topic to enrich their professional practice. In order to qualify as a COP a community must share three crucial characteristics:

- A domain - the group's identity defined by their shared interest
- A community - joint activities, regular interactions and ongoing relationships and;
- A practice - members are practitioners that develop a shared repertoire of resources (Wenger, 2009).

COPs are intended to progress the strategic learning and teaching priorities of the University, as well as support the work of the Learning and Teaching Office (LTO).

These guidelines reflect an organic COP 'lifecycle' and have been developed to provide staff at Notre Dame with a non-prescriptive framework for joining and participating in established groups. Furthermore, they aim to provide consistent high quality experiences for the COP members and the University.

2. PURPOSE

COPs have been established at Notre Dame as a strategy for promoting best practice in learning and teaching, and fostering interdisciplinary networks. A community's specific purpose and goals inform the appropriate activities and technologies that support it.

3. ORGANISING FRAMEWORK

COPs are designed, curated and facilitated around an organising framework that defines the focus of the particular COP. The COP Directory¹ provides a list of the COPs curated by the LTO and brief descriptions that map directly to this organising framework. This is intended to assist staff to locate a suitable group/s to join.

COPs are organised around the following four approaches or combinations of these approaches:

Problem solving

Most COPs have an element of problem solving. A community brings together expertise from a variety of sources to focus on solving a common problem, thus providing benefits to members.

Knowledge creation and sharing

One of the main tasks of a COP is to develop new knowledge that will improve the quality of learning and teaching. A knowledge development community may decide to focus on finding, collating, organising and distributing knowledge that their members use every day. This involves the community sharing information processes and filling knowledge gaps.

Best Practice

A COP focuses on developing, validating and disseminating best practice and one of its projects may be the documentation and dissemination of such practice.

Innovation

COPs may be based around issues of common interest to professional peer groups, with a focus on new and emerging areas of knowledge where there may be the opportunity to innovate. These groups can provide the basis for rapid dissemination of new ideas and resources.

4. PARTICIPATING AND JOINING

How members of a COP meet will vary and is dependent on the topic focus. COPs will always be organised in Blackboard (see Appendix A for the general organising structure), and where appropriate, participants will have the opportunity to meet face to face and/or using video conferencing.

¹ Which will develop over time

Similarly how often a group meets will also vary. Generally speaking however, it is anticipated that the group will meet three times a year. However it is also anticipated that asynchronous contributions occur more frequently and as appropriate to the goals and activities of the particular COP.

To become a member of a COP follow these steps:

- Identify the COP that you wish to join by locating it in the COP Directory
- Contact the COP Curator by email to find out more information about the COP
- Click on the JOIN link provided in the COP Directory and the COP name will appear in your Organisations list on your Blackboard Welcome page shortly thereafter
- Click on the name of the COP in your Organisations list in Blackboard and you will have access to the information and activities in that COP.

5. AGREEMENTS

The following operating principles are intended to assist members to clarify their expectations of each other and the community:

- Members expect to encounter at least one new learning from each encounter in the COP
- Members contribute regularly to the community
- An index of experts identifying their areas of knowledge and experience will be developed and made available to COP members
- Privacy and confidentiality is maintained within the community; and
- Views expressed are those of individual practitioner members.

6. COORDINATION AND SUPPORT

For its COPs, the LTO provides a curator and/or works closely with a Notre Dame academic. Curators are responsible for monitoring the resources, activities, discussion boards and member enquiries. Such resources are targeted at COPs with university-wide membership, and those progressing institutional priorities. Ideally, the COP should be largely self-supporting as this is an indicator of their value to members and the wider university community. The strategies listed below may help to encourage a COP to become self-supporting:

- Members take an active role to share information and expertise and build capacity
- Sharing can draw from wherever the expertise lies, including from within the group, non-members and/or other agencies, and professional staff
- A discussion board encourages members' engagement and sharing of expertise and information
- Links to information about a COP may be made on the LTO website. Links may also be provided from the COP to the LTO website to cross-promote resources
- During the establishment and maturity phase the LTO may facilitate a COP by providing additional support.

7. CURATION AND MAINTENANCE

When a COP has matured it ideally becomes largely self-supporting and the coordination/support role diminishes. The LTO will undertake the following activities to help ensure that the COP is continuing to function well and work towards its goals:

- Maintaining a watching brief regarding participation of members
- Maintaining the COP shell in Blackboard
- Providing the COP useful reference material and information
- Sharing information on visiting experts and other relevant events.

8. EVALUATION AND MEASUREMENT

The 'health' and relevance of the COP will be evaluated by seeking regular feedback from members and periodically evaluating outcomes. Such evaluation will also facilitate identification of emerging issues. Evaluation will be timed to feed into planning cycles to ensure relevance to members' needs and University priorities. Evaluation will include outputs achieved:

- Reaction - the level of participation in the discussion board and other activities along with member satisfaction
- Learning - awareness raising and building skills
- Behaviour - advocacy for best practice
- Results - better practice checklists and toolkits and transformation of practice.

9. CLOSING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

A COP may be closed in any of the following circumstances:

- At its initiation the COP was time bounded
- The group is no longer active
- It has achieved its principal purpose
- It has been assessed by the LTO as no longer serving its original purpose, is no longer considered to be an organisational priority, or has drifted from its agreed purpose.

Suitable processes for closing a COP may need to be taken into account. Issues to consider include:

- Consulting members
- Recognising the group's achievements
- Acknowledging members' contributions
- Notifying members that the COP is closed.

References:

Wenger, E. (2009) *Communities of practice: a brief introduction*. Retrieved on August 15, 2016 from http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/other/communities_of_practice.pdf.

Cambridge, D., Kaplan, S., & Suter, V. (2005). *Community of practice design guide: Step-by-Step Guide for Designing & Cultivating Communities of Practice in Higher Education*. Retrieved on August 20, 2016 from <https://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/nli0531.pdf>.

Appendix A - General organising structure of the COP in Blackboard

1. Introduction – provides a brief outline of the COP and its goals
2. Announcements – allows the curator to send messages to members
3. Calendar - once determined, it identifies the schedule for hosted collaborative sessions and other events which might be held
4. Discussion Boards – provides a space for members to communicate with each other. Threads include:
 - General Discussion
 - Sharing Resources – members can upload resources that they would like to share and the curator will then upload them to the ‘Knowledge Sharing Space’ (see no. 5 below)
 - Themes
 - Working Group Updates (where relevant)
5. Knowledge Sharing – provides a space where content and resources are added by the curator
6. Notre Dame Showcase – is an area for best practice examples of what other Notre Dame staff are doing
7. Tips from Experts – is an area where resources/artefacts such as videos from experts external to Notre Dame can be found
8. Wiki/blog (where relevant) – provides a space for members to contribute to building content e.g. the development of the FYE framework as determined by the LTC working group.