Facilitating Online Communities of Practice

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"Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."

Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4

Communities of practice provide a strong mechanism that enables people to join forces in promoting ongoing growth and improvement. They are based on the premise that learning results from the varied perspectives and experiences that the members share with each other as they work toward common goals. Recently, the federal government has recognized the value of opportunities for peer-to-peer professional learning by investing in communities of practice as part of key initiatives such as the Department of Education's Investing in Innovation, Promise Neighborhoods, and Race to the Top and the Corporation for National and Community Service's Social Innovation Fund.

Communities of practice were originally envisioned as groups that worked together in the same location. Today, proximity is no longer a necessity. Technology can overcome the challenges of time and distance and provide opportunities for interacting with peers, even if those peers are widely dispersed and in remote locations. For example, video can be used to conduct virtual meetings, which can be especially helpful for small schools in rural locations. An online learning community is a way for isolated teachers to connect with colleagues to discuss problems of practice, share observations about their students, and develop lessons or instructional strategies.

Another advantage of virtual communities is that the work of the group can be structured so members can participate whenever they have time. This can help schools overcome the scheduling and funding challenges of supporting collaborative learning for teachers.

The same benefits hold true for any group of organizations or practitioners working within a similar domain. For instance, nonprofits seeking to capitalize on their use of volunteers can benefit from sharing practices around volunteer recruitment, development, supervision, and support. Regardless of the area of practice, organizations of all types benefit from shared learning.

EnCorps—a community of practice hosted by Education Northwest for the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)—was a three-year professional development opportunity that resulted in an online treasure trove of national service resources. Members of the community vetted hundreds of resources from 81 programs across the country. The program directors who participated were able to discuss and share practices and tools on common concerns such as volunteer recruitment and training, site management, resource allocation, and transition out of service. As shown in the comments below, participants found great value in collaborating with colleagues from other community-based programs:

I learned how to articulate my program highlights and challenges and became acutely aware of the truth that "the answers are in the room."

The technology was one of the most valuable aspects in terms of personal professional development—it provided new experiences and means by which to think about connecting our volunteers, who are spread through a large geographic area.

Lessons Learned About Facilitating Online Communities of Practice

1. Work from the needs and interests of the members.
2. Take an active role in nurturing the community.
3. Blend different approaches to maximize participation and learning.
4. Support members who are unfamiliar with the technological tools.

Education Northwest has created communities of practice and other networks in a variety of settings. These range from full-scale communities of practice to improve organizational performance in the social sector to working partnerships with school districts to school improvement networks. A few examples include:

- **Creating and supporting a national network of more than 200 Smaller Learning Community grantees, facilitating information sharing among members, and creating an online collection of resources and tutorials.** The network website featured a searchable database of technical assistance tools and publications, as well as online tutorials that focused on topics such as developing goals and objectives, encouraging staff ownership, and facilitating instructional improvement teams. (Funded by the U.S. Department of Education)

- **Bringing together AmeriCorps and VISTA program staff from across the nation to identify and help implement promising practices and resources to address challenges in recruiting, training, and supervising national service members (volunteers).** Nearly 100 staff members from 81 programs across 26 states participated in a learning community that combined face-to-face meetings with webinars, wikis, and use of online forms to support ongoing virtual collaboration. The participants submitted, reviewed, and vetted their own resources to create a vast web-based collection of effective practices and practical field-based advice. Access to the website is available at http://encorps. nationalserviceresources.org/. (Funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service)

- **Developing an online community of practice for the YouthBuild USA National Mentoring Alliance, which serves as a communication and technical assistance hub for 46 subgrantees located throughout the nation.** Features of the site include discussion forums, recordings of archived webinars, access to training guides, operation manuals, and e-learning modules, links to data reporting websites, and a photo gallery. Grantees can also use this password-protected site to request technical assistance from their assigned program coach. In addition, the National Mentoring Center at Education Northwest (http://educationnorthwest.org/nmc) offers a variety of online resources, including online training for mentors (http://talkingitthrough.educationnorthwest.org) and management of the discussion forum on the Chronicle of Evidence-Based Mentoring website (chronicle.umbmentoring.org). (Funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention)

I have learned more from my participation in this project than any other single thing since I became the program director.

The design of effective communities of practice can benefit from the best available evidence and the professional experience of technical assistance providers. The following lessons learned are based on our work in the field and expertise accumulated through multiple projects.

Lesson #

1 Work from the needs and interests of the members

Although the advantages of online communities are significant, there are potential disadvantages as well. It is easier to opt-out of online communities than it is to avoid local, face-to-face commitments. Therefore, community members will need compelling reasons to make time for participating. Ideally, these reasons will come from the community members themselves because the group was formed in response to their common interests or needs.

Through the Northwest Comprehensive Center, Education Northwest facilitates online communities of practice for state education agency staff who share common roles or interests. These positions can be very isolating in the state, and the members make time to participate because they value the regular opportunity to discuss common challenges and solutions. The focus and membership of the learning communities have evolved in response to changing needs and new regional and federal initiatives.

The members of any community of practice should determine and agree on the focus of their work. In designing the experience for the AmeriCorps and VISTA program staff (see sidebar), we knew that our funding agency was primarily seeking a clearinghouse of promising practices and field-tested resources to address volunteer recruitment and retention. We believed that for this repository to be used, we needed to frame and build the development process as a professional development opportunity driven by the participants. Therefore, we intentionally invited staff members with deep experience and high passion to participate, and then facilitated opportunities for the group to establish their own goals, identify specific topics to address, and develop a process that was flexible and adaptable.

A critical component of the process was the use of online surveys and end-of-meeting assessments to identify emerging needs and evaluate how well the process was

actually working for the group. By conducting evaluations along the way, we were able to stay focused on the needs and interests of the community, and thereby promote use of the clearinghouse.

Lesson #2 Take an active role in nurturing the community

Within any online community, there will be a range of ways that members participate, from visitors to consumers of information to contributors. Few groups will be immediately engaged and active. Cultivating participation usually takes time. For most virtual communities of practice, participants will need encouragement to participate and interact. The key to success is to create easy and meaningful opportunities for all members to contribute.

With the AmeriCorps/VISTA project, we used a wiki—a platform that allows users to collaborate in forming the content of a website—and smaller topic teams to create an environment of peer accountability. All teams were asked to use the wiki to share information and review resources. As a result, each team's progress, including the work of the individual members, was publicly tracked on the wiki. Members could easily see who was participating and could follow the progress of each team. By providing supportive

structures (i.e., a well-designed wiki), we were able to cultivate a high level of participation across the teams.

One way to encourage participation is to seed conversations by using questions and prompts that inspire discussion. A moderator is usually needed to fulfill this role. In addition to posing questions, moderators encourage participation by sharing reactions to what others post.

In our online forums for the National Mentoring Center and the YouthBuild USA National Mentoring Alliance, we have learned that the work of a moderator changes over time. In the beginning the moderator's responsibilities usually focus on encouraging participation. As the online community grows and becomes more active, the moderator's role will shift to monitoring the conversation and keeping it on track. We have found that the moderator will spend roughly the same amount of time on the project, no matter what phase of development the community has reached.

Lesson #3 Blend different approaches to maximize participation and learning

Even when the majority of group work will take place online, it may be helpful to provide at least one opportunity for community members to meet face to face. This allows

participants to develop personal relationships and build trust with each other and the facilitators. An in-person event can be held at the start of the project, at a significant milestone, or at the culmination of the project—or, when possible, more than once.

It is possible to get the same level of participation no matter how the blend is structured. What's important is that each type of blend requires a different approach with different considerations. For example, if you are launching a community of practice virtually with a face-to-face event scheduled midway or at the end of a project, you will need to be much more intentional about how you build relationships at the outset. If a face-to-face meeting is the first order of business, then virtual communications can build on that foundation. Each approach has its advantages and considerations, as described on page 4.

The question is not necessarily, "When should I bring the community together in-person?" but "Will an in-person meeting add value for the participants and, if so, when does it make the most sense?" From there, you can design not only the event itself but how you will support the community before and after the event.

Online collaboration can serve as a means of extending learning opportunities after a professional development event. For example, teachers who participate in a summer workshop often have difficulty putting their learning into practice. For our mathematics problem-solving project, we followed a summer institute with classroom coaching and an online community of practice throughout the following school year. The teachers used an online portal to reflect on their practice, read a common book, and exchange ideas on a regular basis. The facilitator posed

From visitors to contributors
Online communities of practice are often judged by the number of contributors—those who post comments, upload resources, and actively contribute to the community. However, occasional visitors and regular consumers of the information will find value as well, and should be considered important members.

Learning communities evolve over time
The role of the facilitator is to understand and support this evolution in order to proactively ensure maximum value for the members. At times this may mean stepping in to encourage participation or start a conversation.

Blending face-to-face meetings with online collaboration

When the in-person meeting is	Advantages	Considerations
At the beginning	Can use the opportunity to develop strong relationships and build trust early on	Don't have an in-person meeting without a compelling reason to do so, from the perspective of the participants
At a significant milestone	Opportunity to celebrate successes and engage in shared planning	Build in time to celebrate in meaningful ways, including recognizing the contributions of teams and individuals
At the end of the experience	Opportunity to celebrate successes and reflect on accomplishments	Invite the community to provide input on improvements, whether the opportunity should be repeated, and what were the lessons learned
Not possible	Does not limit participation due to travel challenges	A webinar may be a valid alternative to an in-person meeting, especially if you can incorporate the use of webcams

questions for discussion and kept the conversation going.

The final consideration is combining the use of asynchronous and synchronous tools. Asynchronous tools are online technologies that allow for participation at any given time, such as discussion forums, wikis, and online surveys. Synchronous tools require participation at a specific time and include webinars, live online chats, and videoconferences. Using both modes to facilitate online communities provides flexibility and helps to ensure that the members have a variety of ways to interact and work together. The question to consider is, "What combination of tools will add value and best support the community?"

Lesson # **4**

Support members who are unfamiliar with the technological tools

Sometimes lack of participation is simply related to a potential participant's lack of knowledge regarding technology. The community members are likely to have varying expertise and levels of comfort with technology. Some members may need extra guidance in how to use the tools. Before beginning a new group, think about how to ease in members who are less comfortable using technology without making them feel singled out or intimidated.

One way to support technology use is to hold an introductory webinar to give an overview of the applications and websites and to demonstrate how to perform important tasks. This format allows the participants to ask questions and get answers in real time. The webinar can be archived online so that it is available for use after the live event takes place.

Before planning the introductory webinar, ask participants to complete a brief self-assessment about their experiences in using interactive tools. This will provide a glimpse of the range of members' abilities. Some sample questions are included in the sidebar below.

To provide ongoing support, consider creating accessible and streamlined written instructions or job aids. Tutorials are also helpful to demonstrate how to do common tasks. There should also be a way for participants to post questions and get support when they run into problems. This could be an e-mail link or a dedicated section of an online forum. In the first few weeks of work for a new group, it is helpful to provide set times when someone is available via chat or phone to provide real-time help.

Another strategy for providing support is to team up experienced users with new ones. This can be especially helpful in communities that have new members joining on a regular basis. However, this type of support should be in addition to other forms of help, rather than the primary source to avoid

Online Communities: Technology Self-Assessment

- Please share your experiences in using online tools.
- How many webinars have you participated in over the past year?
- Have you posted questions or comments in online forums?
- Have you contributed to a wiki?

over-burdening experienced users and to ensure that new users have a constant source of assistance.

Summary

Facilitators will face opportunities and challenges as they strive to maintain the flexibility that communities need to evolve. The supports that help members become actively engaged and learn from each other are likely to change. At the same time, facilitators are responsible for maintaining the structures that support members' continued participation. When properly cultivated, online communities of practice can provide a powerful platform to construct and share knowledge.

Education Northwest has a well-established track record of creating and facilitating communities of practice and similar networks focused on improving outcomes in education and other social sectors. For more information on these services, contact Jennifer Stepanek at Jennifer.Stepanek@educationnorthwest.org, 503.275.0659.

Resources

McCann, K.H. (2009). *Virtual communities for educators: An overview of supports and best practices.* Technology, Colleges & Community Proceedings. http://etec.hawaii.edu/proceedings/2009/McCann.pdf

Vavasseur, C.B., & MacGregor, S.K. (2008, July). *Online communities of practice: Teachers and principals reforming instruction.* Paper presented at the National Educational Computing Conference, San Diego, CA. Retrieved from http://staging.iste.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Research/NECC_Research_Paper_Archives/NECC_2006/Vavasseur_Cynthia_NECC06.pdf

Wenger, E., McDermott, R.A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Wenger, E., White, N., & Smith, J.D. (2009). *Digital habitats: Stewarding technology for communities.* Portland, OR: CPsquare. http://technologyforcommunities.com/excerpts/actionnotebook/

TechSoup's Online Community Engagement Wiki. A learning community to share suggested practices for getting the most out of online community management & participation. http://knowledgenetworks.wikispaces.com.

CPSquare. The Community of Practice on Communities of Practice. http://cpsquare.org.

You can find this edition of Lessons Learned *and other issues in this series at educationnorthwest.org; type "Lessons Learned" into the search box.*

Checklist: Elements To Promote a Successful Online Community of Practice

Lesson 1
- ✓ Members have determined and agreed upon the focus of their work.
- ✓ Surveys and other assessments are used on an ongoing basis to identify emerging needs and evaluate how well the process is working for the group.

Lesson 2
- ✓ There is an online platform that facilitates interaction.
- ✓ Interactions are "seeded" by the project team.
- ✓ A moderator supports and monitors interactions.

Lesson 3
- ✓ Members have at least one opportunity to meet face to face.
- ✓ The group is supported by both asynchronous and synchronous tools.

Lesson 4
- ✓ Participants can access extra help in using technology, as needed.