

Communities of Practice: An Introductory Guide

What is a community of practice?

A community of practice is a group of people with a common interest, passion, or need who commit to learning with and from each other in order to become more effective in their practice.

This definition draws on the research of Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave who coined the term while studying apprenticeship as a learning model. They observed a complex set of relationships through which people learned together. Furthermore, they saw that this pattern existed in many situations where formal apprenticeship did not exist. The term, communities of practice, then describes a way that people learn together to get better results. The term, however, does not specify a form or structure; in fact, many different kinds of groups can behave as a community of practice.

Wenger (2004) describes three elements that distinguish a community of practice from other groups; these are included in the above definition. First, people are able to find others with a *common interest, passion, or need*; this domain becomes the area of their shared inquiry. Second, people *commit to learning with and from each other*; a sense of belonging, relationship-building, and community-forming are all linked to the group's learning. Third, people focus on becoming *more effective in their practice*; the group develops a shared practice, deepens collective expertise, and puts what it learns into action.

Certain characteristics of learning are assumed to exist within a community of practice, and we want to make those explicit. First, communities of practice are fundamentally *self-directed*. Although there is often a larger context that creates the overall purpose for a community of practice, the members determine together how they will pursue their learning agenda. Second, the heart of a community of practice is *shared inquiry* that assumes that answers to its members' most demanding questions can be found together. Indeed, the answers may already exist somewhere in the community. As Ricci and Rogers (2004) state, "We've created an environment in which all of us are supposed to know the answers. Yet, *learning begins with not knowing.*"

Supporting communities of practice in RUSD

The Ball Foundation is helping the district support the development of communities of practice, not just in the literacy network, but also as a way of working throughout the district. The mission of the Rowland Unified School District describes a system "distinguished by rigorous academics, innovative use of technology, creative exploration, and nurturing learning experiences." Creating this kind of system for the students in the district starts with creating this kind of system for the adults in the district. By developing communities of practice in their work, RUSD practitioners can model rigorous practices, innovative uses of technology, creative exploration, and nurturing learning experiences.

There are at least three reasons that developing communities of practice—as a way of working and learning together, not as specific structures—will help the district fulfill its mission. First, communities of practice bring stakeholders together for *rigorous conversations about practice*. Rigorous conversations hold the potential for transforming

practice. Second, communities of practice enable people to find each other and *make connections across the system*. Strengthening relationships across the district leads to a more interconnected, networked system. Interconnections create coherence across what could be a fragmented, disparate set of stakeholders. Finally, communities of practice can create *powerful learning experiences for adults*. Powerful learning for adults will lead directly to powerful learning for students. Recall the immersion day in which we asked you to think about a powerful learning experience you had. Communities of practice aim to create the conditions for powerful learning and are consistent with the APA learner-centered principles (for example, “intrinsic motivation to learn” and “social influences on learning”).

Beginning your work as a community of practice

Inquiring together in a community of practice is inherently self-defined and self-managed. The district and the Ball Foundation will be providing support for you as you prepare and carry out your learning plan. As you start thinking about forming your group, consider the following principles (Parsons, 2009) and critical success factors (Wenger, 2002).

Parsons (2009) names four guiding principles developed by communities of practice at Bakersfield College that were “designed to promote caring, creative, and energizing ideas and actions that benefit the common good and work along side formal policies.”

- Ask questions that matter.
- Foster a safe, hospitable environment for inquiry.
- Create authentic, open-minded dialogue that reflects diverse perspectives.
- Generate renewing, inquiry-based practice.

Wenger (2002) describes some critical success factors that communities of practice should attend to.

- Area of shared inquiry that energizes a core group
- Involvement of experts
- Addressing details of practice
- Right rhythm and mix of activities

As you begin to answer the questions in the learning plan (What are we trying to do? How are we trying to do it? How do we know we’ve done it?) keep these principles and factors in mind as they can help focus your thinking.

Summary

Community of practice elements

- Common interest, passion, or need (area of shared inquiry)
- Commitment to one another
- Focus on developing effective practice

Learning assumptions in a community of practice

- Learning is self-directed
- Answers can be found through shared inquiry

Benefits of developing communities of practice in RUSD

- Stakeholders engage in rigorous conversation about practice
- Making connections across system creates coherence
- Creating powerful learning experiences for adults leads to powerful learning for students

References

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