

Learning Together With a Community of Practice

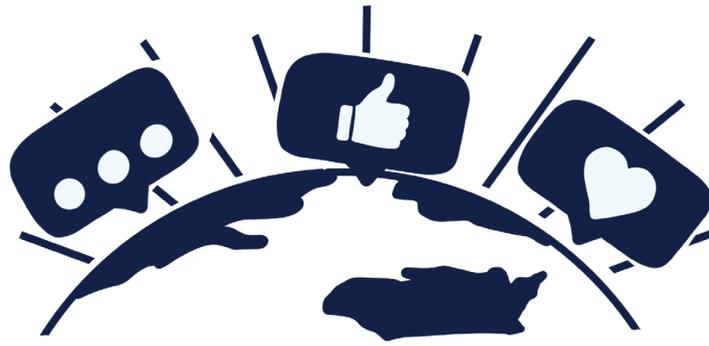
It's common practice for professionals in adult education and workforce development to participate almost exclusively in professional development (PD) activities that take place during in-person events or virtually at webinars. The rapidly changing future of work and learning requires that educators are continuously learning. Technology is often changing, online learning is evolving, and educators should be engaged in ongoing professional development opportunities to build the skills needed to support digital age learning. Online communities of practice (CoPs) can help to address these challenges by making it possible for educators to access formal and informal learning anytime, anywhere, and in collaborative settings.

This toolkit is designed to help adult educators in basic education, literacy programs, community colleges, as well as employers and workforce development agencies, plan, launch, and manage communities that support ongoing professional learning and collaboration. To help meet this need for connection, it introduces the topic of CoPs – which we often simply refer to as “communities” in this document – then covers six steps that organizations should consider as they plan, implement, and evaluate them.

The six steps are:

1. **Asking questions before starting a community (see page 3)** – Use these questions to determine the need for a CoP and to create a simple plan for its success.
2. **Setting the foundation before launch (see page 7)** – Planning tips to lay the groundwork for a successful community.
3. **Choosing your platform (see page 8)** – A brief overview of common structures for online communities.
4. **Promoting your community (see page 9)** – Strategies for recruiting members for your new CoP.
5. **Moderating and monitoring your community (see page 10)** – Suggestions for keeping your CoP on point and fresh.
6. **Reviewing and reporting data (see page 11)** – Evaluating and reporting on the success of your community.

This toolkit was produced by [SkillRise](#), an initiative of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). SkillRise helps organizations empower adult learning with educational technology, including online communities that help adult educators solve pressing problems through peer learning.



Online Communities of Practice

This toolkit focuses specifically on creating communities that exist online, but we use the term online in the broadest sense possible. Online communities can be temporary or permanent, text-, audio- or video-based, and exist on major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc.) or on private proprietary platforms.

Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (2015) write that, “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” CoPs have existed for a very long time, but until recently, members of communities needed to meet face-to-face to interact meaningfully. Thanks to new technologies that make it easy and inexpensive for people to gather in virtual spaces, it’s now possible for people who have mutual interests to interact and learn together by sharing resources and practices no matter where they may be geographically.

Members of online communities typically participate in groups in one of four ways:

- Casual member:** A member who is interested in featured topics, but is generally just exploring available content.
- Engaged member:** Someone who moves from passive content consumption to participation. This could be through participating in a one-off experience on a topic of their choice or sharing a post in the community.
- Active member:** A member who is committed to trying new things and engages in community posts that help them improve their own professional practice.
- Power member:** Someone who is committed to trying new things and is willing to share their learning back with the community at large. Power members post information in the community and may become coaches for active or engaged members. Their work is featured in blog posts, podcasts or case studies.

Depending on how the group is structured, online communities are able to accommodate the needs and interest level of all four types of members.

STEP 1:

Asking questions before starting a community

The following questions will help you consider whether a community of practice is a good fit for your audience. As you answer the questions posed in this section, use your responses to create a one- to two-page plan that outlines the goals for a proposed community. This will help ensure that you take time to clearly think through why you need a CoP, what it is you hope to accomplish, and how you will know if the community is successful.



Is there demand for a community?

Competition is stiff, so before you start any kind of community, you need to know if the target audience you have in mind will find the CoP to be helpful and worthwhile. Additionally, there are 2.2M communities on Reddit (Lin, 2020), more than 2 million LinkedIn groups (Smith, 2020), and more than 10 million Facebook groups (Newberry, 2019), so you will want to see if there are existing groups that address areas of interest/need for your target audience.

While determining the level of need for a new CoP, consider the following questions:

- **Why create a community?** By definition, a CoP goes beyond a simple repository of information by **offering opportunities to interact with other members**. If your group exists solely to push out information to a defined group of educators, a website, blog or e-newsletter will probably suffice. But if your group needs more interactivity, a CoP becomes an option.
- **Who is the audience for the CoP?** You'll want to make sure that you've got a specific group of people in mind because that will affect community rules and outreach. For example, is the community an internal network designed just for your team/colleagues/partners that will include just people you know, or are you targeting a wider audience that might appeal to people beyond your network?
- **Is your audience's level of interest in a community measurable?** If your target audience is a very specific group, such as members of a professional organization, you might be able to send out a survey or host a focus group to get a sense of what people think. If your target audience is based on individual interests rather than ties to an organization or online course, consider whether it's possible to connect through other means like personal outreach, social media posts or an organization's newsletter to gauge interest.

What is the purpose of the community?

Communities of practice can offer many benefits to members, including formal and informal professional development opportunities; ready access to useful resources like lesson plans, research and tutorials; and connections to other practitioners. However, unless creators and members can clearly articulate the purpose of the community, it will be difficult to ensure that it meets the needs of its members. A clear statement of purpose can make this framing possible.

Educators are familiar with vision, mission and goal statements. Use this structure specifically to define the purpose of the community. Here's a brief description of what each statement type addresses:

Vision: Focuses on the future – how membership in the community impacts participants professionally and personally.

Mission: What the community will do today to meet the vision.

Goals: Specific, measurable desired results as a result of participation in the community.

Communities of practice that attempt to be all things to all people often end up failing to offer anything useful to any members. Continually ask, "What makes this community unique? Why should someone join this group as opposed to another similar CoP?"

As an example, a community could exist to support the following vision, mission and goals:

Vision: We envision math adult educators equipped with the skills, knowledge, and tools necessary for creating accessible, engaging, and meaningful online math learning environments.

Mission: We engage math teachers online who are exploring how Desmos can be used to build conceptual understanding versus the procedural focus of other apps like Khan Academy.

Goals:

Quantitative: Number of educators that try using Desmos in their adult education math classes.

Quantitative: Number of teachers to post or reply in the community.

Qualitative: Based on survey of members, the number of members that respond with a 4 out of 5 on a likert scale when asked if the community contributed to their professional development.

Taking the time to think about the purpose of the CoP will ensure that it adds value for your members. It will also help you determine the anticipated lifespan of the community. Is this a group tied to a specific series of events that has a specific beginning and end? Or do you anticipate the community going on for an undetermined period of time? Either option is acceptable, but it's important to know what your expectations are.

Does community size matter?

Successful communities come in all shapes and sizes, but you should still consider the scale of your CoP as part of setting goals and expectations. Consider whether you're expecting your community to be a tight-knit group of under 100 people, a larger group of 100-1,000 people, or somewhere in the thousands.

Community managers will sometimes refer to the "90-9-1 rule," which holds that 90% of community members will lurk but not engage beyond that, 9% will respond to existing discussions and 1% will start discussions. This can be intimidating to new community managers who do the math and realize that means even if you



have 1,000 people in a community, that's still only 10 people starting discussions. There's good news, though; the 90-9-1 rule doesn't necessarily hold up. Current research shows that active and power users now represent about 23% of all members, and engaged users still comprise about 10% of all members, for a total of 33% members who are making contributions to the community. In addition, it's now recognized that the remaining 67% of members, casual users, find value in their level of group participation (McNair, 2020). This means you don't need thousands of members to have a thriving community.

The other good news is that even very small communities can succeed. Consider a group of work colleagues who regularly serve as online peer reviewers for one another. This community might have just a handful of members, but it can still be buzzing with activity when a report is being written and critiqued. That said, small communities do have a smaller margin for error. If a few active people leave or disengage, that can bring the conversation to a halt.

How will the community be moderated?

A community of practice won't run itself; you need a **moderator**... who actually moderates. Best practice is typically to develop up to five norms for writing posts and comments in the community. For example, a norm might be, when asking for technical support, it can be helpful to include a screenshot. Share these norms with new members, and then set the community to full moderation at the start, meaning no post becomes visible to members until it's approved by a moderator (typically a staff person who has been assigned this task). This creates extra work for someone and can slow down the pace of communication, but the benefit is that it ensures only high-quality content is seen by members of the community. It's also an opportunity to model what type of content is appropriate and desirable. When it appears, the community has a firm understanding of appropriate content, there are a minimal number of discussion posts requiring feedback from staff, and it can be okay to turn off full moderation, allowing community members to post without staff approval.

On the other hand, if you're planning to launch a community intended just for your staff and colleagues, it may be OK to give full control to members at the outset. After a few weeks, be ready to reflect with your team about how the CoP is evolving. Consider questions like: What kinds of posts are useful? What kinds aren't? Decide as a team if there is a need to define any new rules moving forward based on those first few weeks online together.

Who will manage the community?

There is more to operating a successful community than moderating posts. A staff member needs to manage the CoP. This includes informally monitoring posts on an ongoing basis to ensure members continue to adhere to group norms. A **community manager** also needs to help keep content fresh by posing questions or discussion prompts, replying to points made in discussions, adding relevant information about activities and events, providing relevant resources, and leading new member recruitment. The level of management will vary depending on the purpose of the group and the expectations set for member participation. Depending on the size and goals of the group, a manager may need to spend anywhere from four to 20 hours per week to successfully foster the connectivity.

It takes a concerted effort to make online communities succeed. Here are a few suggestions:

- Identify one or two staff members who have a portion of their workday specifically allocated to manage the community.

- To maximize your chances of success, be realistic when allocating a specific amount of time the community manager will be expected to devote to the group each week.
- Create clear, specific expectations about the tasks these people are responsible for, including the level of daily moderation, creating and implementing synchronous events for the community, and managing resources posted to the group.

Without this level of formal support, it's very unlikely the community will succeed.

What does success look like?

Hopefully, you have used your answers to the previous questions to develop a plan for the CoP. If not, take time now to review decisions you've made and create a simple outline of your plan as you will need this information to determine what success looks like for your community. How will you know if the community is achieving its purpose? What measurable goals did you identify and how will you specifically assess their attainment?

You may be able to measure some of these outcomes yourself. For example, one indicator of success might be the number of members recruited each month or the number of people who make an original post every month. If you offer synchronous activities, you could measure the number of attendees or how many individual members participate in two or more synchronous events. Others might require checking in with your community members periodically to see if you're achieving goals. In that case, you may want to survey members for feedback on how they are using the CoP or what features they find most valuable. You might also randomly interview individual members to get more in-depth feedback from them.

With data in hand, one helpful strategy can be to write brief summaries of your findings at various intervals and make those findings available for community members to review. Sharing insights from your research can help engage members around what's working and where you might be headed with the community.

What happens if the community doesn't take off?

Communities that are initially unsuccessful generally fall into two categories: (1) communities that need more time and (2) communities where a proper foundation wasn't established.

In the first case, a closer look often reveals that the community is struggling because it's not being actively managed by someone who has the time to work on it. Perhaps the organizers of the CoP believed, "If we build it, they will come." If your community just needs more time, remember this is a marathon, not a sprint. You will likely need to be proactive over a long stretch to support member engagement. This is why a community manager can be essential, as they can:

- Monitor discussions to ensure that posts or questions from new members receive responses. Engaging new members early is a great way to encourage further participation.
- Regularly add new, timely resources.
- Plan and implement synchronous activities like virtual coffee breaks or webinars.



If your community is growing by whatever metrics you've defined as a reflection of success, you're on the right path. Continue using the metrics to measure progress regularly and refine strategies to continue improving the community.

In the second case, slow or even no growth often means the hosting organization may not have done its due diligence in determining if its audience was in need of a community or in developing a plan for creating and sustaining the CoP. There isn't a single right answer to the question of how long to keep working on a community in the hope that it eventually takes off. Some organizations might have the resources to keep a community operating for years, even with limited engagement. Other organizations will need to move more quickly.

In general, we recommend looking first at the anticipated lifespan for the community. If it's a short-term group that is being well-managed, let it run its course. If you're in it for the long haul, review the data trends for the community. Are there any positive signs of growth month to month? Are existing members reporting getting value from the group? If so, it might just be a matter of rethinking the timeline and accepting that it will be a long road to a vibrant, thriving community.

If you're not seeing positive trends in your data, review whether you're covering your fundamentals:

- Is the community being managed by someone?
- What do you know about existing members and why they joined the group?
- Do you have volunteers able to help provide answers and start discussions?

If you have done all those things and still aren't seeing success after one year, it might be time to consider sun-setting your community.

STEP 2:

Setting the foundation before launch

Community structure: Keep it simple

When determining the structure of your nascent community, there may be the temptation to try to be all things to all people. That inclination may lead to creating multiple subgroups within the community based on geography, job role or subject matter. It might even result in multiple communities, which can quickly become unmanageable. In nearly every case, what makes the most sense initially is one community for all of your members. This lets you focus all of your attention and energy in one place and avoids fragmenting your audience. As your community matures over the coming years, you'll see when it makes most sense to create subgroups or even additional CoP with a more targeted focus.

Prepare seed questions

A key step in preparing for launch is creating questions to promote discussions. These are questions that can be posted by staff, volunteers or willing members of the community to help jump-start activity. Plan to have two questions a week queued up for at least a few months, as that gives you a solid repository of questions the community manager and volunteers can choose from whenever the community needs a boost in activity.

Creating 104 questions in one sitting can be challenging, especially if you're working on your own, so invent ways to complete the task with help over a defined period of time. Use social media to ask friends and followers to pose questions relevant to the focus of your new community. Or, ask colleagues during staff meetings to contribute original questions you could use.

Proactively recruit members

One way to generate a membership base immediately is to make being a part of the community a benefit of membership. When someone joins the hosting organization, let them know that they automatically become a member of the community of practice. Depending on the platform chosen for the group, if you have an existing database of your stakeholders, you may be able to use that to invite them to join the community with the click of a button. Share the purpose and goals of the new CoP with them and suggest ways they can benefit from, and contribute to, the community. It isn't vital to a successful community launch, but recruiting members upfront does give a running start to building a sustainable conversation.

Nurturing community champions

To increase your chance of success, consider creating a volunteer program for your community. Participants in these programs are often called ambassadors or champions and can be vital in a community's success. Each week, share a list of discussions that need replies with the volunteers, or ask them to start new discussions themselves. Begin with a small team that can be scaled up later to a larger group without requiring much staff time.



If you aren't sure who to invite to this volunteer program, consider who is already a fan of your organization. Your regular conference attendees, your most loyal social media followers or even your board members can all be good sources of community champions. Volunteering to support the community can be a great way for people who don't have time for a more traditional volunteer role to give back, and it can be done anywhere and anytime.

STEP 3:

Choosing your community platform

The following is not a comprehensive guide to choosing a community platform, but does provide some general guidance to steer you in the right direction.

There are multiple platforms to choose from, with fees ranging from free to tens of thousands of dollars per year. These options range from email listservs to threaded discussion boards to online social media groups and more. The key point to remember is that while important, the platform you choose is not the sole determining factor in the community's success or failure. If you have done the preliminary planning, and know your CoP's purpose and audience, you'll be able to select the platform that's the best fit for your group.

Here's a brief overview of some of the types of community platforms, listed in no particular order. Note that the platform options listed below are included in this toolkit because they are currently free and common:

Format: **Listservs** - A listserv is a way to communicate with a group via email. You send a message to one email address and the platform sends it out to everyone on the list.

Platform Options: [Google Groups](#)

Pros & Cons:

- Works well with small groups.
- Most users are familiar with email.
- Possible to access previous emails.
- Less interactivity than some other platforms.

Format: **Threaded discussion** - Online discussions about specific topics posted on a site called a "discussion board." A discussion prompt is posted on the board and members add their replies to the relevant post.

Platform Options: [Slack](#), [Twist](#), [Discord](#)

Pros & Cons:

- Discussions are organized into channels.
- Members are notified of new replies to topics they are following.
- Easy access to all group communication.
- Twist offers a full free version for education and professional communities.
- Free version has some limitations.

Format: **Social media groups**

Platform Options: [Facebook Groups](#) [LinkedIn Groups](#) [Twitter](#)

Pros & Cons:

- Many people are already familiar with these platforms.
- Ease of use.
- Good for large groups and recruiting members.
- Often can be private or public.

STEP 4:

Promoting your community

Typically, you can begin promoting the new community about one month before launch. This gives you some time to build up excitement and awareness without it dragging on too long. Your marketing strategy should be shaped by who you want to join your community. Below are a few of the most common scenarios.

If your plan calls for a small community that's focused on your own staff and collaborators, personal outreach is the best option. Use individualized messages that speak to their needs and why you'd value their presence in the community. If the platform you've chosen allows you to do this, ask your contacts to confirm that they consent to joining the community and then add them yourself. This ensures that people who want to join the group are actually added.

If your plan calls for a larger community that's open to everyone in the field, you can still reach out personally to your most important stakeholders, but you can also pull out all the stops to raise awareness as much as possible:

- Give the community prominent space on your organization's homepage, letting visitors know it's coming soon.
- Include a blurb about the new community in your organization's newsletter.
- Advertise the community on social media channels (both those belonging to the organization and your own professional accounts). Be sure to explain the professional benefits of joining the community.
- Send a series of emails sharing features of the community to your mailing list.
- Be sure that all your promotional messages include information about how to join the community.
- Consider emailing partner organizations to share the CoP opportunity with their staff. In your personal outreach to colleagues, it can help to include a short paragraph about the community so it's easy for colleagues to copy and paste the message into their outreach email to their networks. The paragraph should include a quick overview and link to sign-up.

STEP 5:

Moderating and monitoring your community

As mentioned previously, we recommend developing up to five norms for writing posts and comments. For example, you might say that when writing a post, members need to share something they know, something they want to know or something that's working well for them (all related to work). Another norm could be that comments need to add value by asking a question or adding information relevant to the topic. Share these norms with members and set a new community to full moderation at first, meaning no post becomes visible to members until it's approved by a moderator (typically a staff person who has been assigned this task). This practice can be stopped once you're confident that most posts meet the standards for your community.

One way to help all members meet the standards you've set for posts and comments within the CoP is to be transparent and upfront about group norms from the beginning. Some platforms provide an opportunity to add a list of norms (or group rules) when you set up the community, but if that's not the case with the platform you're using, the norms can be added to a post that's pinned to the top of the group page. When new members join the group, send them a welcome message that lists norms for posts and comments. If you need to delete a post or comment that violates group norms, privately message the member who wrote it to let them know why. Most people do not intentionally violate norms and just need a reminder to redirect their behavior.

Once norms for posting are understood and followed, most communities can be monitored through a daily scan where the manager reviews all active discussions to make sure all new content is appropriate for the group. This is also an opportunity to make note of where your community volunteers need to step in, whether that's responding to an existing discussion or starting a new discussion to help liven things up.



STEP 6:

Reviewing and reporting data

Data review is a critical part of community management and should be done regularly. For example, looking at membership growth or member engagement numbers can help you know if the community is succeeding or failing. Because each platform has such different reporting capabilities, this discussion on data review and reporting is focused more on developing a philosophy than on specifics.

As stated above, one purpose of writing a CoP plan is to help you determine if the community is meeting its stated goals and that information can be shared with appropriate stakeholders through simple reports at predetermined intervals. For example, if a goal is to promote member interaction through informal, synchronous online coffee breaks, you might count how many coffee breaks were hosted during a specific timeframe and the number of attendees at each. Or, if a goal is to foster collaboration across adult education programs, you might measure how many different organizations participate in your community.

There's also some baseline data that can be valuable as a way to regularly take the pulse of the community:

- Number of members.
- Number of new discussions started.
- Number of replies to discussions.
- Number of first-time contributors.
- Number of unique contributors.

These data points don't necessarily connect directly to your community goals, but they can be useful as a general way to see participation trends, such as if you have a steady flow of new participants or if a few people are dominating the conversations.

One point to keep in mind is that some questions may be difficult to answer unless you survey community members. If your goal is more ephemeral, such as fostering a sense of belonging, you'll need to survey your members to see if you're succeeding. Surveys can be an invaluable tool for collecting information that's not reflected in the community activity data. Consider using free tools like [Google Forms](#) or [TypeForm](#) to quickly create forms to capture feedback from community members.

Conclusion

This toolkit is designed to help adult educators in many sectors start and effectively manage communities of practice to support ongoing collaboration among educator groups. SkillRise seeks to advance adult education and workforce development by helping practitioners use technology to improve learning. Often, such learning occurs in peer-to-peer contexts, where we learn from others who share interests or professional duties such as job roles. Robust online communities expand and enhance opportunities for PD that aren't limited to annual meetings, don't require a travel budget and are always accessible. The quickly shifting future of work, the need for adult learners to build new digital skills, and the requirement that career educators become comfortable with using technology in the classroom all necessitate continuous learning and upskilling. This is also true for students, managers and other stakeholders. CoPs can be used to connect one audience with new local and global audiences of collaborators and engage them in an ongoing process of sharing, reflecting and learning alongside peers in the field. Welcome to the future of lifelong learning!



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