Join a Community of Practice

This resource supports the development of level 1, stage 3 core capabilities.

# Contents

[Contents 1](#_Toc176422242)

[Introduction 1](#_Toc569522918)

[What is a Community of Practice? 2](#_Toc1067474106)

[Being part of a CoP 4](#_Toc511771773)

[Tips for a successful CoP 6](#_Toc747812323)

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| Logo for Commonwealth of Learning (image including a book and a globe) | This resource was created by Commonwealth of Learning for the TVET Professional Development Toolkit for the Pacific |

# Introduction

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people. They have a shared professional interest. They come together to support one another to learn more about their profession.

For us, this means a group of TVET practitioners who get together to develop their skills and knowledge related to TVET.

Joining a CoP is a way to:

* learn new things
* become a better TVET practitioner
* connect with other professionals
* be a part of a team where everyone is equal.

A CoP can be face-to-face or online.

# What is a Community of Practice?

## Other names for a Community of Practice

A Community of Practice is sometimes called a CoP. You may have heard of some of these other terms, which are similar:

* professional group
* professional circle
* professional community
* learning network.

## CoP meetings

CoP members meet regularly and talk about their shared interest. In TVET, members will all be interested in training for workplace competencies.

In the meetings, members share stories about their own training and hear stories from other members. This could be about:

* challenges and looking for solutions
* sharing resources
* reflecting on practice
* celebrating success stories.

## Benefits of a CoP

Being part of a CoP comes with many benefits. Here are some examples.

### Check in on your practice

The group can help you to check if you are heading in the right direction with your teaching.

### Encourage good practice

The group can work together to create a common good practice for everyone to agree to and follow.

### Support change

Making changes for your industry may be hard on your own but, a group has a lot more power.

### Belong to a team

The group will give you a sense of belonging and being part of a team. Working as a team means that you can work together on common problems to find solutions.

### Innovate

As a group, you can keep finding new and better ways to do things.

### Learn from experience

The group can learn from each other’s experiences by sharing stories.

# Being part of a CoP

There are many reasons why a CoP is a good idea for you as a trainer. Explore this section to see what they are.

## Support network

As a trainer, you may feel alone and isolated at times. Your learners expect you to have the answer to everything. Sometimes, you might feel like you don’t have much support, or that you are expected to ‘sink or swim’. Sometimes managers think this is an excellent way for you to learn, but not having support can be very stressful and make it hard for you to stay motivated to work.

Being a part of a CoP can be a great support network for you. If you feel supported, you will feel more motivated and confident in your practice. If you are confident, it means that your learners will trust you. This is called credibility.

### Example of how to use a CoP for support

Let’s say you have a tricky situation with a learner that is struggling to learn. You feel that you have tried everything, but they just don’t seem to get it. Your CoP could help you develop some new ideas and techniques that you haven’t tried before. If it’s a success, you become a better trainer. Your learner also becomes more confident.

## Experiential learning

Being part of a CoP gives you an opportunity to learn and develop as a trainer. For example, you may struggle to teach a theory topic to your group of learners. Your learners find theory hard because they are more hands-on. You may feel stuck. This is something that you can take to your CoP. By interacting with others in the group, you can learn some other techniques and ideas you can try out.

### Example of using a CoP for experiential learning

Another way you could use the CoP is to experiment with new ways of teaching. This will be a safe environment for you to do that. You can even try it out as a group. Other people in the group can give you feedback, which is also a great way to learn. As a group, you can reflect on your experience and discuss what new knowledge you gained. Finally, you can try this out with your own learners. This is called ‘experiential learning’ or learning through experience.

## Sharing knowledge

If you have a mentor or a ‘go to’ person in your own organisation, they could be an excellent resource. However, people do change jobs from time to time and when they leave, they can take their knowledge with them.

Being part of a CoP means you have a group of experts who can share their knowledge. Your own knowledge can also be a small part of the total knowledge available. Other members in the group may share different ways of doing things. This includes sharing things that don’t work as well as those that work well. We can all learn from mistakes.

### Example of sharing knowledge

Sharing knowledge also works in two ways. You can share some of your own knowledge and mistakes to help others learn and you can learn from their knowledge and mistakes. Your CoP will be a safe environment to talk about your experience.

## Sharing resources

We have all faced challenges where we did not have enough resources or money available to help us teach. Other trainers will be facing the same challenges. Your CoP may be a great place to discuss these challenges and to share ideas on how to overcome them. Even better, it could be a way for all the members all to share resources. This could save you a lot of time as you won’t need to recreate resources that someone else could share with you.

### Example of sharing resources

Shared resources could include training material or equipment. Members of the group may have some creative ideas that might have worked for them in the past such as connecting with local businesses and communities. They may be able to put you in contact with someone else that can help.

# Tips for a successful CoP

Being successful will take commitment. This section will look at some ways you can ensure your CoP is a success.

## Clarify who the CoP is for

A CoP works best if the members all share the same type of job. This is because it is important that group members feel safe in the group so they can talk freely about things they find difficult, try new ideas, and make mistakes.

* A trainer may feel uncomfortable to share if their manager is in the group.
* A manager may feel uncomfortable to share if a regulator is in the group.

In TVET we can have a separate CoP for these different types of roles:

* trainers, teachers, tutors
* regulators and policy makers
* managers, heads of school, deans.

## Establish two key roles

### Organiser

Make sure you have someone to organise and nurture the group. This person can take care of things like arranging the time and date for meetings, finding a room the room and sending out invitations. They can manage a group email and communications about the CoP. They can also contact members of the CoP to ask for topics to discuss or activities to do. This can form an agenda for your meeting. It is important to have an organiser for your CoP because many groups fail because people lose interest and don’t have the energy or time to organise meetings.

### Facilitator

The facilitator’s job is to make the meetings of the CoP run smoothly. They may or may not be the same person as the organiser. This means ensuring the group’s discussions stay on track and that it covers everything on the agenda for the day. The facilitator or the organiser can also note down action points for the meeting or some ideas for the next meeting.

## Meet regularly

Making time for meetings is a challenge for most people, especially when they are busy. If people are interested, it makes it easier. The secret to success is to make the time you spend together as a group ‘good value’.

It will take commitment from everyone in the group to make time to meet regularly. It’s essential as you will get to know the people in the group over time and connect with them. This will help you to get comfortable and to build trust. It’s important if you are going to support each other. It might be a good idea to start the CoP by meeting once a week, even if it is during lunch. As the group matures, it could meet once every second week or once a month.

## Share stories

Start your CoP by talking about respect for each other. Encourage the members of the CoP to share stories and listen to each other respectfully and with an open mind. This will help to create a safe environment. By hearing stories and telling their own, people start making connections.

“Yes, I know what you mean. That happened to me too.”

Sharing stories creates opportunities for learning, building trust, and supporting each other. It adds value. Although it’s good to share your challenges, make sure you also share your success stories. The meeting should allow people to interact with each other.

## Network

If you find like-minded people in the group, connect with them. You don’t have to wait for the next meeting to talk to them. Forming networks outside of meetings could help you in your role. People from your CoP may also introduce you to some other people who could help you.

## Use a mix of activities

Make sure that you have a good mix of activities at each meeting. Here are some ideas for a good mix of activities.

Table 1 Activities used in CoP meetings

| **Activity** | **What happens in the activity?** |
| --- | --- |
| Share stories | Share stories about challenges and successes. |
| Try learning activities | Include some activities or techniques for the group to try out. This could be something you could try with your own learners. |
| Showcase | Someone in the group could share something that they are working on. It might give others in the group some ideas.  |
| Invite other experts | You could invite an expert to talk about a topic. For example, you could invite an expert on literacy and numeracy. This could give you some ideas to deal with challenges. |
| Ideas for resources | Invite a local business or community representative to talk to the group about working together and sharing resources.  |
| Recognition | Recognise members of the group for doing well. This could be for contributing to the group or trying something in their teaching that was a success.  |

## If it works, do more

At the start, it will take a bit of time for the group to take off. It might feel challenging, but just keep going. Try different things. See what works and what doesn’t. If you find something in the meeting that works well, then do more of it!

## Activity

Invite some colleagues to meet and brainstorm how you could form a CoP.