

Building Virtual Communities of Practice

Discussion Reflections,
Resources, and Links

 TAMARACK
INSTITUTE

Building Virtual Communities of Practices Highlights

Who's in Our Virtual Room?

- 500 registrants + 350 receiving the recording
- 7 countries (Canada, USA, UK, New Zealand, Australia, Greece, Kenya)
- Multiple Sectors:
 - Non-profit/community
 - Government (especially municipal)
 - Health
 - Education
 - Consulting



What are Communities of Practice?

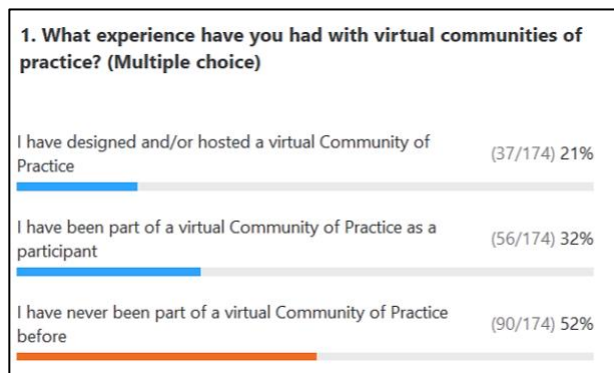
- Communities of Practice (CoPs) are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”
- The current COVID-19 environment is raising interest from many about how to design and host Virtual Communities of Practice well

Communities of Practice: Lessons Learned

- Tamarack's Lessons Learned in designing & hosting Communities of Practice
 - Create high value for members
 - Engagement is key
 - Set clear expectations
 - Stimulating learning
 - Establish a predictable rhythm
 - Reinforce ownership
 - Seek feedback
 - Leadership is required
- Design considerations for Virtual Communities of Practice include:
 - Connect the CoP to your online platform by posting shared tools and resources online
 - Create CoP members and connections through video and pictures
 - Use chat, 'rooms', polls, whiteboard functions to create a more interactive experience
 - Follow up with recording, key links, resources, etc.
 - Explore other technology options

What We Heard from You:

You have varied levels of experience with virtual Communities of Practice



Shared Links and Resources

- [TOOL | Designing Virtual Communities of Practice](#)
- [TOOL | Virtual Peer Input Process](#)
- [10 Guide on engaging those with lived/living experience](#)
- For more about the United Way of Greater Atlanta's CoLabs Process contact Laura Heiman via email: lheiman@unitedwayatlanta.org
- [Beyond the Project: Ongoing Community Engagement a Tamarack Webinar with Anthea Robinson-Shaw, of Bang the Table](#)
- Resources about Living Wage
 - [Canadian Living Wage Framework: A National Methodology for Calculating a Living Wage in Your Community](#)
 - [Register to participate in Tamarack's Living Wage Community of Practice](#)
- [Watercooler Webchat re: bringing ecology education into an online format](#)
- [Faculty Mentoring Network CoP to share adapted or new teaching modules](#)
- [A Small Group Triads and Questions for Civic Engagement](#)
- [Simultaneous translation on the Zoom Platform](#)

Your Comments and Questions:

What Design Elements Are You Now Using to Build Connection?

- Platforms I use include zoom, facebook, jitsutech, polleverywhere
- We are experimenting with combining monthly Zoom calls with an ongoing, interactive platform (we are using MS Teams)
- Google Jam board - a free platform available through Google suites! A fun tool to engage virtual COP members in real time meeting spaces
- We are combining Zoom videoconferencing with Basecamp (project management tool) for our CoPs for the past couple of years
- I have been using MS Teams, there have been challenges with walking everyone through & completing the sign-up process and not all can access because of Firewalls
- I've had good experiences with using Discourse (an open source platform, to host a 'forum' for shared learning) but it does take some effort to manage on the back-end
- We chose to use MS Teams with our cohort after members voted this as their favorite and one member offered her account and tech / design support. If a cohort member weren't offering this to everyone, we may reconsider to something like jam room.

Lessons Learned in Hosting Virtual Learning

- We have had trouble with shared documents in the past because not all of our participants had access to the same platforms and technologies
- I think that evolution of CoPs is so important. Start simple and organic and then add tools as the need arises.
- A few lessons we have learned:
 - All CoPs are not created equal! We have learned it's best to clearly define the CoP and the roles of facilitators and participants

- Basecamp is a great digital tool to use as a collective workspace for the group. It allows for asynchronous connections while team members contribute to learning through shared documents, ongoing group chat, and assigned tasks.
- We need to be flexible in how we plan around CoPs - surveys are important for feedback on the process
- Incorporating engagement activities is so important!! (Using things like Kahoot, Quiplash, etc.)
- Assigning roles to manage Basecamp and respond to members in a timely fashion is crucial
- We chose to use MS Teams with our cohort after members voted this as their favorite and one member offered her account and tech / design support. Some of our lessons:
 - Made sure to have a small “team” of two cohort members agree to try out the platform before launching and worked with them to craft the invitation to other CoP members
 - The person who offered her account has helped folks with tech support and adapting the platform
 - Folks have not started engaging too actively on the platform yet so we are testing out ways to encourage use and interaction. So, we are trying is posting virtual gathering artifacts on that platform, then emailing folks to look there rather than just sending the materials out directly via email.
 - Momentum seems to be gradually building. I love the idea of co-editing a document!
 - We have had some hurdles as well with MS Teams being difficult for people to join. If a cohort member weren't offering this to everyone, we may reconsider to something like jam room

Your Current and Emerging Questions:

- What are your recommendations around the size of a CoP? How do we approach this and prevent a CoP from growing "too large?"
- What is a good time period to give to breakout groups? (A: For timing of breakouts - it's really dependant on what you're asking people to discuss. The way I gut-check it is to think about how much time each person should have to talk. If 1 minute and there are 6 people, I'd allow for 10 minutes)
- What skills or abilities should a facilitator of a community of practice have? And how familiar with the particular topic or challenge should they be?
- Should the facilitator in the community of practice float between break out rooms to tune into the smaller group discussions? (A: Yes, jumping into each breakout group can be helpful if groups are working on a particular activity. If it is an open discussion there is less need.)
- How does a Community of Practice differ from Collective Impact?
- How does a CoP differ from committees, task forces, and advisory groups? (A: It sounds like CoPs are participant driven while committees, task forces and advisory groups might be driven by the organization or project.)
- How do you ramp up first time users to a virtual platform? It can distract from the flow and energy of the group?
- How do you start/engage virtual Communities of Practice in rural areas where internet/tech is not always accessible?
- Any suggestions in terms of size of group?
- Any thoughts on building trust - especially if geographic distances are great and/or members occasionally compete with one another for grants?
- Would you call a coalition in a rural region a community of practice?
- How could you handle 2 languages? (A: The Zoom Platform allows for simultaneous translation)
- Can you please elaborate on using CoP process for systems thinking or addressing systemic barriers to change?

- Do you have a tool that you would use to assess effectiveness, partnership strength, functionality of an existing COP?
- How do you engage people with disabilities? is there a suggested platform that has accessibility features
- How do you address challenges of new people coming on board after start-up, or member groups having more than one person participate but not necessarily consistently? I see challenges in having participants float in and out, perhaps missing introductions, opportunities for trust building, etc.
- How did you navigate the tension between participants being quite busy but really wanting to learn for the CoP? how do you create an inviting and enabling environment in the CoP?
- Any ideas on how communities of practice connect to Participatory Action Research?

Our Collective Next Steps:

1. Share all resources from this call including your feedback
2. Determine interest in Tamarack hosting a Community of Practice for Designing & Hosting Virtual CoPs