

A GUIDE | TO MANAGING
COMMUNITIES
OF PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

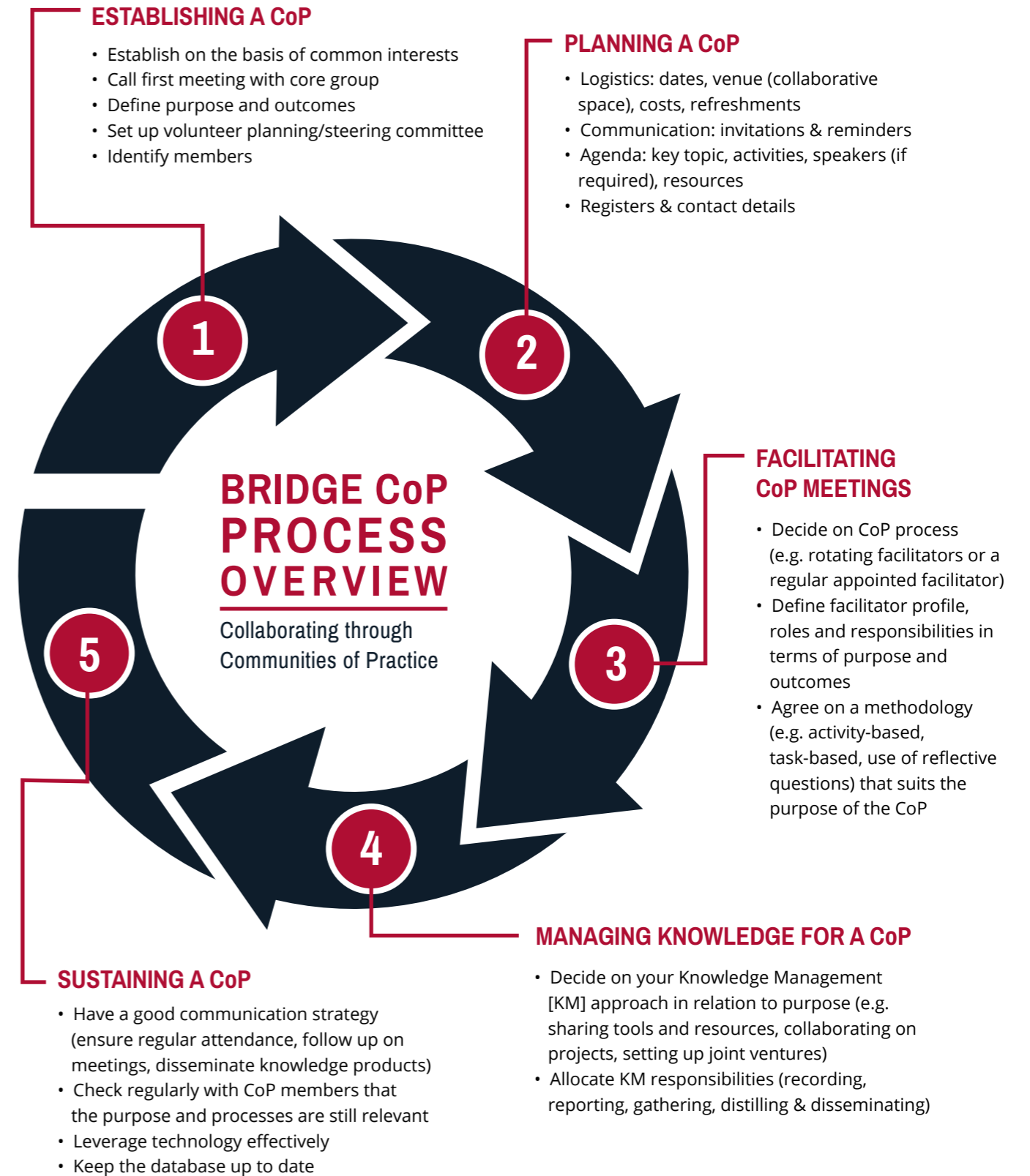
This Guide is intended for groups of people who want to set up and run Communities of Practice (CoPs). It draws on BRIDGE's experience in convening and managing CoPs in different focus areas in the education sector, and shares some strategies from the BRIDGE methodology for BRIDGE-run CoPs.

Regardless of its specific purpose, there are overarching outcomes for any Community of Practice which believes in the principle of collaboration and aspires to have a positive impact on education. BRIDGE has formulated these as follows:

- The contribution of the community to the whole system;
- Creating common purpose, peer support and trust among stakeholders;
- The maximising of resources by the community;
- The spread of effective practice within the community and its associated stakeholders (horizontal integration); and
- The vertical integration of policy and practice.

The Guide is aimed at people working in the education sector, whether these are from groups of schools, NPOs and NGOs, or teachers, sector specialists or people with different roles in education who want to collaborate in a particular area. Given that education and training environments in South Africa are so diverse, many of the strategies suggested here will need to be adapted to suit the context and needs of the CoP. In rural areas with connectivity challenges, for examples, CoPs may need very different approaches to the logistics of scheduling and convening meetings to those in urban areas. There will be differences in the ways in which CoPs operating in under-resourced contexts and those in well-resourced contexts plan for any financial outlays.

The Guide takes a process approach to describing elements involved in managing CoPs, as illustrated below.



ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

1.1 DEFINITION

A Community of Practice (CoP) is established on the basis of a common interest and shared learning goals in relation to that interest.

1.2 PURPOSE

The purpose of a CoP is to connect people in the spirit of learning, knowledge sharing and collaboration. Members take part in facilitated meetings to discuss relevant topics, share working practice, expertise and resources, and collaborate in innovative ways. Through the networks that participants build in their CoP, members learn new things, add value to their professional lives, hone their skills and develop their organisations. CoPs may also have a very specific purpose, such as building expertise in a subject area, or investigating a particular model in a field. One example would be a CoP focused on teacher induction; another would be a CoP focused on using ICTs in the classroom.

1.3 ACTIVITIES

CoPs engage in a range of activities in any one session, and over time. Clearly, activities will be determined by the purpose of the CoP. Here is a list of some of the things CoPs might do in support of a shared goal:

- problem solving
- requesting information
- explaining and sharing tools and methodologies
- seeking experience
- reusing assets
- coordinating and strategising
- building an argument
- growing confidence
- discussing developments
- documenting ideas or developments in the field
- working on projects
- mapping knowledge and identifying gaps.

“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.”

Etienne Wenger

1.4 OUTCOMES

The outcomes from these activities could be both quantitative and qualitative.

Quantitative outcomes include:

- improved skills
- spread of useful information
- reduced costs through shared resources and less duplication of effort
- a quicker uptake of effective solutions
- the proliferation of effective practice.

Less tangible outcomes include:

- shared problem-solving
- the development of a sense of trust
- increased self-reflection
- more collaboration
- an increased ability to innovate.

The work of Wenger and Trayner has described how Communities of Practice operate and the characteristics of such.

(Refer to: <http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>).

They were the pioneers of research in this area.

PLANNING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE MEETING

2.1 AT THE FIRST MEETING

At the first meeting your core group must carry out several key tasks as the basis for the life of the CoP:

- Define your purpose
- Appoint a CoP ‘champion’
- Set up an initial steering committee
- Consider cost implications
- Decide on size and membership.

Planning a CoP is a collaborative effort. Successful CoPs have several self-directed team members who are willing to serve on a planning or steering committee to identify topics of interest, direct the CoP’s growth and manage meeting logistics. Generally, though, it is useful to identify a ‘champion’ who will take the overall lead in managing the steering committee and the CoP. Once you have your steering committee set up, brainstorm a list of potential meeting topics, identify internal and external guest speakers, and draft a tentative calendar of events for the CoP’s activities (weekly, monthly, quarterly and/or annually).

The other two key roles that need to be discussed and defined are those of the CoP facilitator (see 3) and the knowledge manager (see 4). These are separate roles and should not be handled by the same person in one CoP meeting, but both roles can be rotated and shared amongst CoP members.

2.2 IDENTIFYING MEMBERS

Identify the right people

The community’s group profile will be determined by the defined purpose of the CoP, and may be fairly specific (limited to a targeted interest group), or wide-ranging and multi-stakeholder. A CoP should usually include frontline practitioners working in the field, as well as those involved at other levels such as training or policy. CoPs generally thrive on drawing on a variety of perspectives.

Map local services

Map the services or interests offered in your group to ensure that you get a comprehensive range of professional expertise in the CoP. Identify areas in which you don’t have existing relationships as well as those in which you do.

Think about size

A balance needs to be found between ensuring your CoP is a manageable size and that it benefits from the range of expertise and roleplayers that suits the purpose of the CoP.

Outline expectations

Clearly outline the commitment expected from CoP members. Consistent membership is an important feature of a successful community and participants should commit to attending most sessions.

Volunteers not conscripts

Participants should convene voluntarily, and should attend because they are enthusiastic and value what the CoP has to offer them.

2.3 ONGOING TASKS: LOGISTICS AND ADMINISTRATION

Scheduling

Schedule each CoP meeting well in advance. Setting a regular time for meetings helps participants to prepare beforehand and cements the meeting as a regular feature in their diaries.

Speakers

Review potential speakers, topics and activities for meetings going forward. It is also useful to put in a standing agenda item for CoP members themselves to suggest topics and speakers.

Agenda

Set and circulate an agenda which includes a check-in and check-out process as well as a tea and/or lunch break. It is important to strike a balance between presentations and group work to ensure members remain engaged. Each meeting agenda should provide a space for CoP members to formulate future agendas: this relates to what the CoP wants to talk about, and any projects or tasks that the CoP as a whole (or sub-groups within the CoP) may want to take on.

The Community of Practice is owned by its members, all of whom should get an opportunity to give input into proposed meeting agendas, activities and outcomes.

Directory

Create a directory or folder for organising contact details, discussions, documents and other resources. Build up your database with information on external speakers as well as regular attendees.

Nuts & Bolts

Make a note of all the responses to your invitations and develop a registration list for the CoP meeting.

Costs

Draw up a budget for costing support of the CoP. Costs may include items such as venues and refreshments, the cost of using technology, content publishing and promotional expenses. Decide at the beginning how the CoP will be funded or how costs will be shared amongst members. It is important that these costs are allocated and tracked in a transparent way. If you are going to appoint an external facilitator, this is an additional cost.

Venue

Book the venue (and organise refreshments) well in advance. Although members may be able to offer their premises for free, finding a space away from the workplace can help participants focus on the meeting itself. As far as possible try and get a venue that provides a space which allows for conversation and collaborative activities; for example, one with moveable chairs and tables so that participants can sit in circles and groups. Traditional lecture halls are not appropriate for CoP meetings.

Using technology and resources

Ensure that all multimedia requirements for presentations are met. Provide members with a wi-fi password where applicable. Bring along all the necessary stationery, resources and briefing notes for group work.

Reminders

Send a reminder to all members to RSVP in advance and confirm the number of attendees. Don't forget to send another reminder a week before the event.

FACILITATING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

CoPs benefit from the guidance and support of knowledgeable and skilful facilitators who understand the needs of the group. They play a crucial role in creating and maintaining an open, positive and participative environment which will ultimately determine the success of the CoP, so it's important to choose the right individual to take on this role. It is also important to use a facilitation methodology which will drive the CoP towards achieving its desired outcomes. If your CoP decides to rotate the role of facilitator amongst the members, you may need to discuss a common approach to dealing with group interaction and activities. If you are funded, you may decide to appoint and pay an external facilitator according to criteria which you draw up.

Below are some general tips on successful facilitation approaches to CoPs.

3.1 PROFILE OF A COP FACILITATOR

A Community of Practice facilitator...

... understands how groups work

Facilitators need to be familiar with group processes and dynamics so that they understand the different stages of group development, and can deal with group conflict. The facilitator does not necessarily have to be an expert in the focus area of the Community of Practice, as long as he or she has an understanding of the broader educational context and the skills to facilitate effectively and to synthesize the sharing of information. There may however be CoPs which require a subject-matter expert to facilitate if the defined purpose is to be achieved.

"Group facilitation is a process in which a person whose selection is acceptable to all the members of the group, who is substantively neutral, and who has no substantive decision-making authority, diagnoses and intervenes to help a group improve how it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, to increase the group's effectiveness."

Roger Schwarz 'The Skilled Facilitator:

<http://english.iifac.org/services/facilitation/iifacs-approach-to-facilitation/>

... is people-orientated

Facilitators need excellent interpersonal skills. They should be welcoming and able to put people at ease, have good listening skills, be able to adopt a neutral position and encourage different viewpoints. This may involve managing those who are too dominant, or those who are too shy. Effective facilitators ensure equity within the group by attending to members' varied needs and perspectives. This not only allows individuals to learn what they need to learn, but also supports the group in developing strong collective understandings and commitments. Facilitators must make sure that all group members have opportunities to raise questions and express alternative viewpoints, so that the group's learning pushes beyond simply perpetuating accepted practice. In this way, a broader pool of knowledge and working practice is created.

... knows how to build trust

A community of practice which encourages learning, collaboration and innovative thinking is also a context in which there is risk. Some members may feel reluctant or anxious about sharing information which exposes personal vulnerabilities, or which lays open their organisations to criticism. Facilitators play an important role in modelling openness and honesty to a community. They can support trust-building by acknowledging members' feelings and learning experiences, upholding norms of collaboration within the group, and by following through on actions and agreements.

... knows how to encourage and deepen self-reflection

CoPs that are focused on learning generally see self-reflection as an element of growth. Self-reflection is also a methodology that encourages the sharing of practice between members of a CoP.

... knows how to facilitate activity-focused and task-focused meetings

CoPs are more than talk shops. Meetings should not be limited to 'expert' presentations followed by plenary question and answer sessions, but should be structured around a range of different interactive whole and small group activities (smaller groups within a CoP may decide to take on projects with specific outputs). This characteristic means that some attention has to be paid to the physical features of a venue – ideally, CoP members should be able to sit in a

circle or horseshoe, and there should be tables and chairs available at which group discussions can take place. Facilitators should also be familiar with methodologies that support the building of networks and trust. For example, how are introductions, check-in and check-out processes handled? Can the facilitator (with the planning committee) formulate thought-provoking check-in questions related to the theme of the session, or ones that will allow participants to identify possible partners? How can meeting closings be done so that there is some connection to follow-up interactions or to subsequent meetings?

3.2 FACILITATOR'S ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

It's important for facilitators to facilitate and not chair the meeting. Facilitators should not take on a management role or try to solve the problem. They should function as guides or "discussion leaders" for the group.

A facilitator helps a CoP function effectively by playing these key roles:



ORGANISER

- Assists the planning/ steering committee with preparing activities, check-in and check-out questions, and materials for each CoP meeting.
- Helps the CoP identify key issues to discuss, usually something that affects all members.



GUIDE

- Clarifies and reinforces the purpose of the CoP.
- Customises meeting plans to meet the CoP's needs.
- Explains the agenda and ground rules.
- Guides the CoP through activities.
- Suggests methods and procedures that can help the group work better.
- Reinforces guiding principles and effective norms of collaboration.
- Keeps the discussion focused.
- Ensures that everyone has a chance to participate.
- Helps to ensure understanding.
- Facilitates dialogue that enables members to link their learning on working practice with their professional contexts.
- Fosters reflection on working practice and professional growth and learning.
- Encourages directed and active self-reflection.



SUPPORTER

- Encourages risk taking, learning from mistakes, group trust and self-reflection.
- Supports the group's needs.
- Provides extended learning opportunities.



HISTORIAN

- Reflects on the group's understanding and learning.
- Reminds participants of their previous learning.
- Links each new meeting with the learning from the previous meeting.
- Follows up on the group's identified action steps.

Note: this is a different role to that of the knowledge manager (see 5). It is very difficult to both facilitate and capture discussions and outputs, and this should not be expected of the facilitator.

3.3 FACILITATOR INTERVENTIONS

There are different types of facilitator interventions and each depends on the purpose of the CoP and the nature of its members.

Some interventions include:

CONCEPTUAL SUPPORT

To provide an organising concept, specific technique, series of steps, set of ground rules or exercises that help the group accomplish its task.

PROMPTING

To help prompt, reinforce or clarify already agreed-upon standards or processes.

PROCESS OBSERVATIONS

To heighten a group's awareness of what is happening and point out the implications and consequences of the group's actions.

EVALUATIVE REFLECTIONS

To use the power of the facilitator role to reinforce effective ways of thinking and problem solving, and discourage ineffective ones.

SILENCE

To use silence effectively - not intervening is sometimes useful to build the sort of tension that is necessary to spur the group into redirecting its own actions without the facilitator's help. This intervention is best suited to mature or highly effective groups.

In sum, a facilitator requires a grounding in behavioural psychology; an in-depth understanding of group dynamics; the ability to question and process the responses; and a resistance to telling, replaced by a preference for asking.

BRIDGE OFFERS A TRAINING PROGRAMME IN FACILITATING COPS, BASED ON THESE APPROACHES TO FACILITATION. THE BRIDGE WAY ALSO DRAWS ON 'THEORY U' AS A MEANS OF TAPPING OUR COLLECTIVE CAPACITY. THE JOURNEY THROUGH THIS THEORY DEVELOPS SEVEN ESSENTIAL LEADERSHIP CAPACITIES WHICH CAN BE USED TO CHANGE INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS. BRIDGE BELIEVES THAT ALL HAVE THE CAPACITY TO LEAD IN A SPECIFIC YET INDIVIDUAL WAY AND THEREFORE USES ASPECTS OF 'THEORY U' IN ITS WORK WITH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE.

To find out more, please contact info@bridge.org.za

FOLLOWING UP ON A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE MEETING

The follow-up process is important for keeping CoPs sustainable, and maintaining the interest of members. Follow-up tasks include:

Distributing assessment/ evaluation forms to CoP members to determine the meeting's success or failings. This information can help you plan and structure your next meeting. It also serves as a check on the health of the CoP (see 6 below).

Sending a thank you email to attendees after each meeting.

Sending a list of contact information to all CoP members to support ongoing networking.

Making all presentations that formed part of the meeting available to CoP members.

Following up on any actionable items as discussed during the meeting.

Reminding CoP members of forthcoming meetings.

Disseminating any knowledge products that may have come out of the meeting.

MANAGING KNOWLEDGE FOR A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

5.1 WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT?

Knowledge needs to be seen as an asset, whether it belongs to an individual, a group, an institution, an organisation, a corporation or a country. What constitutes 'knowledge' for a corporate (e.g. brand identity; management systems) may be very different to what it means for organisations or institutions working in the education sector, and what it means for a development-focused Community of Practice.

Here is an overview of the most commonly used terms to describe 'knowledge' as these are likely to apply to the work of a Community of Practice.

TERM	DESCRIPTION	SOME FEATURES
EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE	'KNOW-WHAT' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalised and codified knowledge Fact-based information Organised, classified and contextualised data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Found in databases, statistical analyses, manuals, official documents and so on Easy to source, store and retrieve
TACIT OR EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE	'KNOW-HOW' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intuitive, experience-based Rooted in expertise, skills, practice and action Often grounded in commitment and involvement Often context dependent and personal in nature 'Includes cultural beliefs, values, attitudes, mental models, etc. as well as skills, capabilities and expertise' (Botha et al 2008) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Found in the minds of stakeholders, practitioners, communities of practice Can be difficult to communicate, mediate or transfer Often passed on through socialisation, mentoring and collaboration
THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE	'KNOW-WHY' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of the principles and concepts relating to a topic rather than application of these principles in practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalised in various subject disciplines Often open to debate and contestation
EMBEDDED KNOWLEDGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refers to the knowledge that is locked in processes, products, culture, routines, or structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Found in established practices, protocols, rules, organisational procedures etc. While embedded knowledge can exist in explicit sources (i.e. a rule can be written in a manual), the knowledge itself may not be explicit

As with many attempts at putting boundaries on concepts, it has to be accepted that these forms of knowledge will overlap: in practice, most knowledge is a mixture of some of these elements.

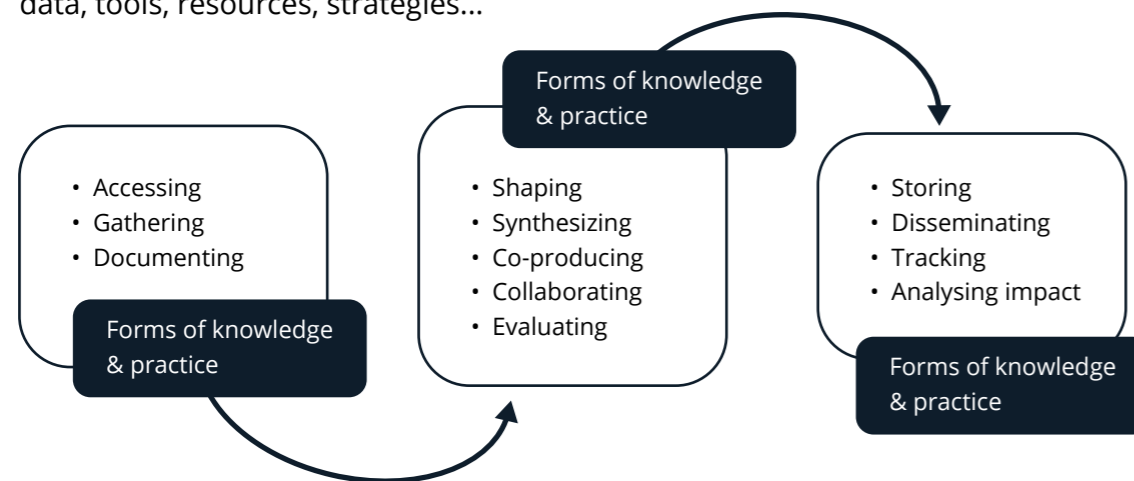
Knowledge management refers to processes put in place to capture, develop, store and share the types of knowledge described above as generated and grown by a group. In a development-focused context, 'management' of knowledge is concerned with the interactions between knowledge, actions and behaviours.

"Knowledge management is the process of capturing, distributing and effectively using knowledge."

Thomas Davenport

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IS SHARING

...working practices, research, networks, stories, data, tools, resources, strategies...



5.2 KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

A CoP is an ideal vehicle for knowledge growth and for leveraging of all types of knowledge, because it enables person to person interaction whilst engaging a whole group in advancing its field of practice. This mutual engagement develops individuals professionally and helps improve their performance. As a result, they can spread insights and successful practice from that collaborative thinking across organisations and, conceivably, across whole spheres of society.

Knowledge management in a CoP supports an expanding cycle of growth through the production of 'knowledge products (KPs)' - such as tools, resources, summaries, examples of practice or methodologies - which in turn stimulate further development. This can help drive innovation, especially if used, shared and adapted by individuals across a range of organisations.

Shared information needs to be captured and processed. If knowledge management in a CoP is to be taken seriously, 'knowledge managers' or 'knowledge workers' who are willing to be proactive in this role need to be identified. The tasks can be shared and rotated amongst CoP members.

Decide early on in the CoP process what level of detail from CoP discussions will be captured, and what types of outputs or 'knowledge products' the CoP will produce.

Tasks could include:

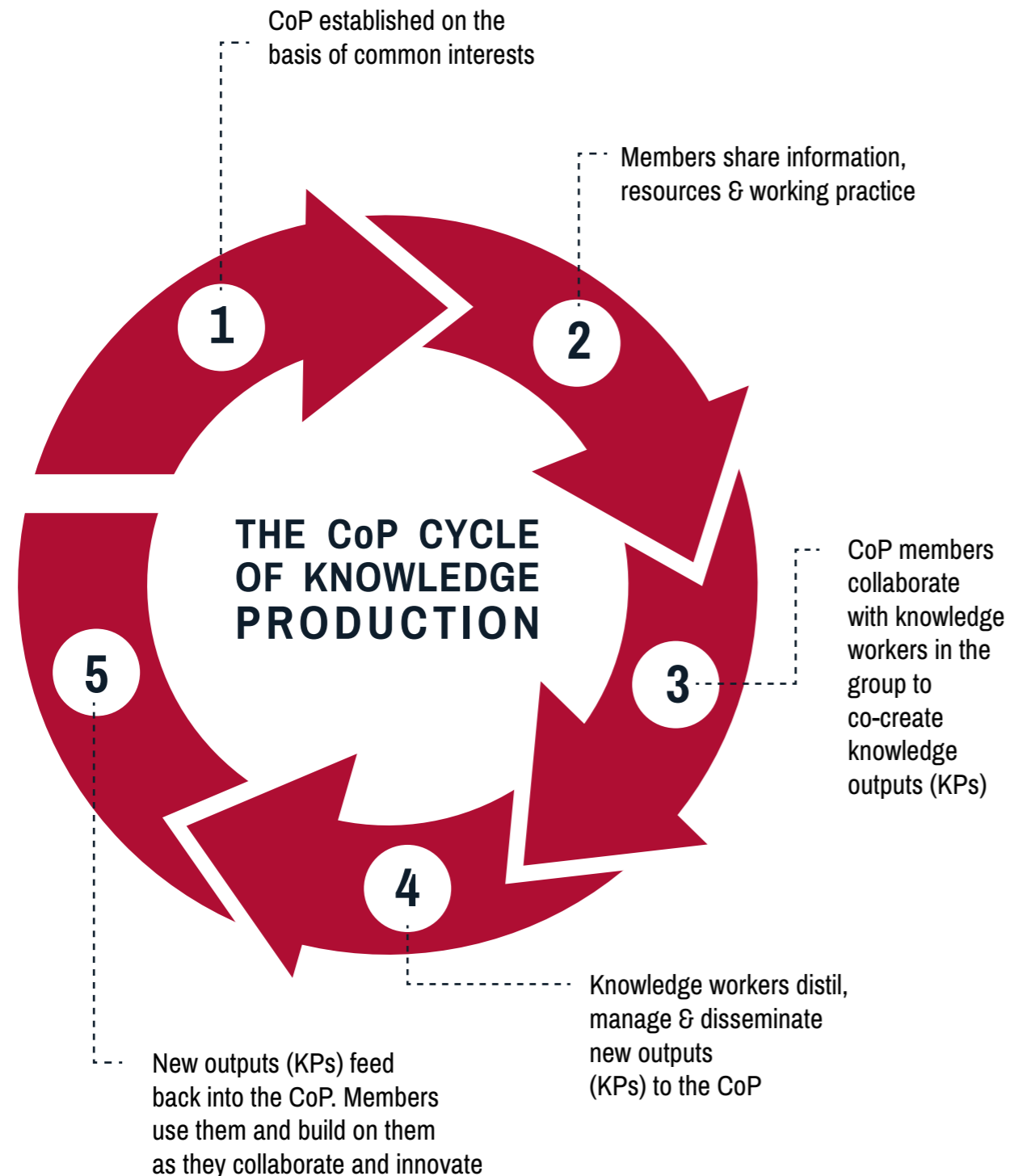
- Capturing key points from a presentation and subsequent discussion.
- Recording actions to be taken and allocating responsibility for these.
- Recording and structuring any outputs from group activities or projects.
- Summarising useful information such as policy developments.
- Gathering any useful tools and resources shared at the meeting.
- Sharing any outputs with CoP members.
- Carrying forward any ideas that may result in a collaborative project for impact.

"Knowledge shared in Communities of Practice is used for developmental impact; knowledge management aims to result in purposeful and action-oriented change."

BRIDGE

SUSTAINING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The CoP cycle of knowledge production is illustrated below.



CoPs are dynamic social structures that require cultivation in order to grow and mature. CoP leaders can take action to help the process, as suggested below. Ultimately, however, the members of the community are responsible for defining the CoP and sustaining it over time. In addition, a CoP has a life cycle and an end point when it is no longer useful to its members.

Dealing with group conflict

With a range of participants, differences of opinion are both likely and healthy. However, if there is conflict over the direction of the CoP there needs to be a process for resolving this.

Ensuring regular attendance

This can be an issue as members try to carve out time from their busy schedules to meet. Some tips to encourage regular attendance include making sure that you set meeting dates early and remind attendees well in advance. Making people feel welcome and providing refreshments is another incentive to attend.

Establishing clear roles and responsibilities

Successful communities explicitly define roles and responsibilities for all community participants. Leaders, subject matter experts (SMEs), co-leaders, coordinators, facilitators, knowledge managers and members must understand what is expected of them if a community is to function as intended.

Provide opportunities for members

Make sure that different members of the CoP have opportunities to play different roles within the CoP. Experiment with doing different things in CoP meetings.

Leveraging technology thoughtfully

Technology can be used to promote networking and sharing. Social media platforms, blogs, collaborative document authoring tools, webinar services and other technologies can facilitate more effective personal connections and enhance collaboration. New technologies can also be used to experiment with new community activities and provide opportunities for members to play new roles in the CoP.

Connecting people to people

Communities should focus on connecting people across sector lines, geographies, and functions. To facilitate this, be sure to provide open access to the contact details of community members.

Promoting awareness and communicating value through knowledge management

Growing your CoP and ensuring its efficacy in the long run requires publishing outputs and sharing successes. You can employ a number of communication techniques to communicate the value of CoPs to members, raise CoP awareness and articulate CoP benefits and results. Encourage publication of articles and stories about the CoP, its members and its projects.

Measuring health across the CoP life cycle

Regularly measure your community for vitality and performance. Use evaluations and surveys for understanding where there is dissatisfaction and help identify when communities need to be invigorated or retired. Review purpose and goals, and be aware of shifts in expectations and needs in order to improve community strategy and value.

Understanding barriers to sustainability

The most common reason why a CoP fails is lack of commitment and interest from its members, which may in turn be due to a host of factors. This is why it is important to regularly review the CoP goals and 'health', as noted above. The availability and willingness of a core leadership team is also vital. Other barriers include lack of direction and scarce resources, such as funding or availability of meeting venues.

TWO CASE STUDIES

We have included short overviews of two of BRIDGE's Communities of Practice to illustrate different types of scope and purpose for Communities of Practice.

THE ECD COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

BRIDGE's National ECD (Early Childhood Development) Community of Practice was set up in February 2013. It is a multi-stakeholder CoP which includes ECD practitioners, training providers, academics, funders, and representatives from different government departments with an interest in ECD. This is a large CoP, which has a core group of consistent members and a number of ad hoc participants who come depending on the topic.

Most sessions are attended by about forty members, with some sessions going up to sixty participants. It is managed by BRIDGE and has since inception been facilitated by a regular facilitator who is experienced in the BRIDGE methodology.

Responding to the needs expressed by the CoP, the ECD CoP meetings have tended to focus on three areas:

NETWORKING

A member organisation is frequently profiled at the meeting, and CoP members express appreciation for opportunities to get to know what others are doing in the field. The CoP also highlights the work of any other collaborative forums which bring together funders, providers, practitioners or other stakeholder groups in ECD.

POLICY UPDATES

The CoP has frequently invited relevant officials or experts to present updates on important policy developments in the ECD field.

KEY TOPICS IN ECD

Any topics of interest to members, such as approaches to play theory or views on nutrition for young learners.

As this CoP has become more established, these areas of interest have given rise to specific tasks and activities undertaken by sub-groups of the CoP. One example is the joint submission from CoP members in response to the public comment phase of a new ECD qualification. Another example is the development of a self-reflection tool to help ECD practitioners understand quality in ECD.

THE PRE-SERVICE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

As the name suggests, this CoP has a very specific focus in a sector of educational endeavour. There has been a growing realisation that the traditional route to becoming a teacher, through studying at a higher education institution, has a number of limitations. In response to this, a number of organisations and schools are trying to find new and alternative ways of developing young people as teachers, and have been involved in implementing student-teacher internship programmes as a pre-service training method. The genesis for the CoP was the realisation that, by coming together and sharing their models and practices, this

group could become a collaborative advocacy group for better models for pre-service teacher training, to the benefit of education as a whole.

Members come and present features of their own models and approaches (such as induction and mentorship programmes) to the group and open these up for discussion. In addition, the CoP focuses on bringing in other forms of useful information to the meetings, including different approaches to funding, and policy developments that impact on teacher training and study options.

The purpose of this CoP is best captured by some quotes from members at different meetings:

"The goal of this CoP is to nurture our common purpose while celebrating our different contexts. Innovation can come from combining practice which is already happening in new ways."

"When we do new work we have to stay open to possibility: we have to break our own patterns and learn from alternative approaches."

"This CoP can help us create platforms rather than work as separate entities, which in turn will give us a stronger and more coherent voice in any negotiations."

This CoP has a small and regular membership, as the members are working concretely on putting together a collaborative model for accessing funding and support for pre-service teacher training models. The facilitator is the head of one of the member organisations and has played this role since the CoP started.

This CoP in this guise will probably have a specific lifespan, and once it has achieved certain milestones in relation to partnering in pre-service teacher training models, its work may take on a different direction.

