

# Changing perspectives on communities of practice

Reflections from BRIDGE experiences in the time of Covid-19

## A BRIEF REMINDER

The concept of a community of practice (CoP) is familiar to those working in education. Its defining characteristics are usually referenced to Etienne Wenger's work, and include the elements shown here.



## LEARNING QUESTIONS: THE CONTEXT

Over the years BRIDGE has run a number of communities of practice in different domains, or what we call 'focus areas'. In line with the concept of a CoP life cycle, some of these are no longer in existence, and current CoPs are at different stages. With the onset of Covid-19, all our CoP events had to move online. This inevitably resulted in changes to our CoP methodology and facilitation, and, critically, the profile and size of each community. Ease of online access as compared to face-to-face attendance has meant that CoP events have attracted increasing numbers of new, once-off and irregular attendees, with CoP events regularly reaching between 80 to 100 participants.

Before the onset of Covid-19, we were beginning to see our CoPs as representing a range of CoP types as opposed to a single, uniform model. While all BRIDGE CoPs adhere to a general high-level set of desired outcomes, each CoP defines its own purpose, and grows its own specific objectives; while all BRIDGE CoPs adhere to certain facilitation

principles, different CoP facilitators began to develop their own style in response to the participant profile; finally, the multi-stakeholder nature of some CoPs has led to very different dynamics to those which bring together people with the same or a similar role (e.g. CoPs specifically for school principals). Clearly, not all BRIDGE CoPs were operating or evolving in the same way. Into this increasingly complex CoP landscape came Covid-19, fast-tracking BRIDGE and our CoP members into an online learning space.

These factors prompted us to pose a number of 'learning questions' about the nature of communities of practice, for both the current context and for BRIDGE's future work in this field. A survey with members who have attended CoPs in 2020 has provided feedback on some of the issues relating to online CoPs. We would like, however, to expand the debate into a larger arena of educational thinking, and initiate a new conversation on the nature of communities of practice as these respond to changing circumstances and contexts.

To give context to our learning questions, here is a quick glance at some of the differences between CoPs and other convenings.

<b>Webinars</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ These are usually stand-alone events.</li> <li>▪ A webinar is designed to be online.</li> <li>▪ Its key purpose is the presentation of information on a topic by an expert to an undefined audience.</li> </ul>					
<b>Workshops</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ These can be stand-alone or part of a short-term series, with a clearly defined purpose and audience.</li> <li>▪ People work together on something, and usually have to apply skills learned.</li> <li>▪ There is usually an expert or trainer leading the workshop activities.</li> </ul>					
<b>CoP meetings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ CoP meetings happen at regular intervals, often without a defined end date.</li> <li>▪ They are set up for an identifiable and stable community.</li> <li>▪ They are aimed at the progressive building up of trust and shared understandings over time, in order to spread good practice.</li> <li>▪ All participants have some level of subject matter expertise and a common interest.</li> <li>▪ CoPs are action-driven, and can lead to the development of concrete outputs.</li> <li>▪ There is a knowledge management component in terms of documenting, packaging and disseminating CoP work</li> </ul> <p>Examples of activities include:</p> <table border="0" data-bbox="272 1178 1514 1615"> <tr> <td data-bbox="272 1178 651 1615"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking</li> <li>• Developing trust between members</li> <li>• Forming partnerships</li> <li>• Co-creating products and resources</li> <li>• Discussing and documenting ideas and innovations in the field</li> </ul> </td> <td data-bbox="651 1178 1066 1615"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying and solving problems</li> <li>• Requesting and sharing information</li> <li>• Planning and strategizing for joint activities</li> <li>• Explaining and sharing tools, methodologies and practices</li> <li>• Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps</li> </ul> </td> <td data-bbox="1066 1178 1514 1615"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying duplicated efforts</li> <li>• Growing confidence and competence</li> <li>• Responding to policy and other contextual developments</li> <li>• Setting up working groups to take forward specific issues</li> <li>• Providing learning opportunities</li> <li>• Reflecting on own practice</li> </ul> </td> </tr> </table> <p>Some of these activities need to be grown and developed with a core group over time, while others can happen in any one session.</p>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking</li> <li>• Developing trust between members</li> <li>• Forming partnerships</li> <li>• Co-creating products and resources</li> <li>• Discussing and documenting ideas and innovations in the field</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying and solving problems</li> <li>• Requesting and sharing information</li> <li>• Planning and strategizing for joint activities</li> <li>• Explaining and sharing tools, methodologies and practices</li> <li>• Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying duplicated efforts</li> <li>• Growing confidence and competence</li> <li>• Responding to policy and other contextual developments</li> <li>• Setting up working groups to take forward specific issues</li> <li>• Providing learning opportunities</li> <li>• Reflecting on own practice</li> </ul>
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## THE LEARNING QUESTIONS

These questions are framed by BRIDGE principles, perspectives and experiences in setting up, running and managing communities of practice. For each of the questions below, some preliminary thoughts as these relate to different CoPs are noted.

## Can we generalise about the kinds of outcomes we can expect from CoPs?

Different types of activities lead to different levels of CoP outcomes. For example, the development of trust leading to increased collaboration is a high level outcome which can only happen over time, with a core group of CoP members; the spread of useful information, however, is a lower level outcome which could result from one CoP event. While we continue to plan BRIDGE CoP meetings to address at least some of these activities per session, key issues are:

- Some activities rely on participative, action-driven group work which is difficult to manage online.
- It is easier for participants to remain anonymous and withdrawn online.
- While most CoPs still maintain a core group of regular and committed members, there is a continuous influx of new 'ad hoc' attendees who may have an interest in a specific topic, but who are not committed to taking part in an ongoing community.
- Due in part to these factors, the historical focus on concrete, useful CoP outputs such as specific tools or knowledge products has been diluted.
- Some CoP outcomes can only be achieved if there is stable and regular attendance by the same people over time. As CoPs are voluntary, there are many circumstances beyond BRIDGE's control in terms of member stability.

## Does size matter, and does the delivery method matter?

With a few exceptions, BRIDGE has a policy of 'open membership' to a community of practice. While we send invitations to those on our database, these are often shared with others, and CoP meetings are in any case public events. Anyone can attend.

Traditionally, BRIDGE face-to-face CoP meetings ranged from about fifteen to twenty five members, most of whom would be regular participants. Numbers occasionally swelled in specific CoPs across one or two meetings, depending on contextual factors (e.g. the announcement of new policies for ECD). Pre-covid numbers also increased when we entered into partnerships to run certain discipline-specific communities, such as the Monitoring and Evaluation CoP. With Covid and the move to online CoPs, numbers have increased radically, due to easier access, shorter meetings, and the general thirst for information to help with addressing the impacts of Covid-19.

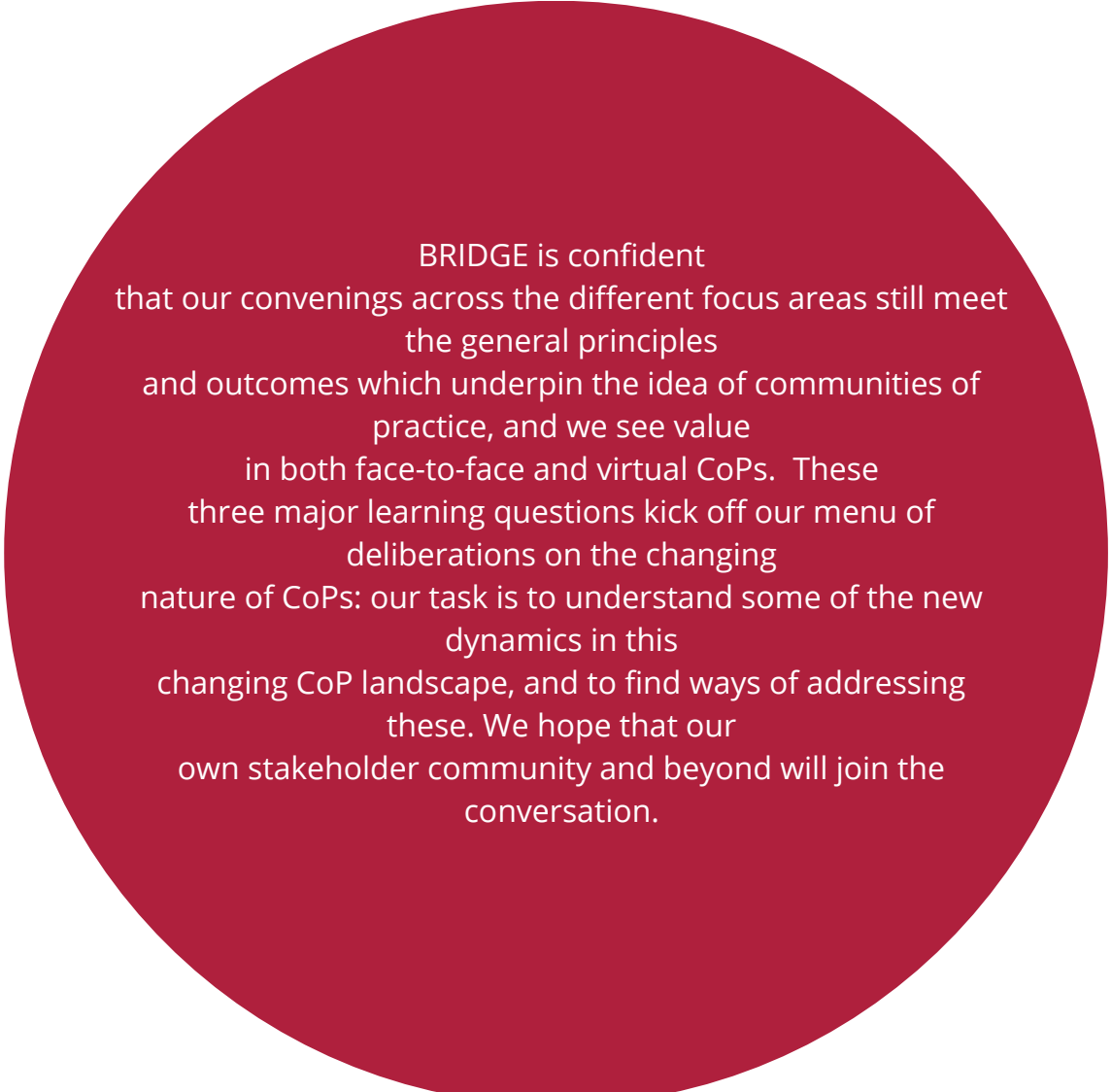
The short answer to whether these two elements matter is yes. Obviously, the larger the group the more impersonal the proceedings become. Group work aims to mitigate this, but brings with it its own challenges, such as how the group work is facilitated and who is in these groups. Online delivery is also very different to face-to-face meetings. Apart from the more leisurely and informal networking opportunities offered by coffee and lunch breaks – the lack of which many CoP members have noted – the depth of conversation that can be achieved face to face is sometimes missing in online communications. Group interactions and individual follow ups become less intentional.

Closed CoPs have managed to avoid some of these challenges, even in their online format. Closed CoPs are those which are invitation only, and are (generally) uni-stakeholder.

BRIDGE examples are the Principals School Leadership CoPs (invited principals only), and the Initial Teacher Education CoP (invited university educators involved in teacher education only). The small size of these groups allows for all voices to be heard, and the regularity of attendance means that participants know each other and feel free to drill down deeply into issues of concern.

## **What does it mean to be 'engaged in practice' in a domain?**

It is far easier to talk about the community profile for uni-stakeholder CoPs, such as principals or teacher educators: these are clearly all practitioners in a specific domain or focus area. It is also easier to run CoPs with more homogenous groups with stable attendance. However, the multi-stakeholder nature of most BRIDGE CoPs is a foundational principle, and a feature that we see as a major strength in achieving impact through our communities of practice. Stakeholders include groupings such as government, funders, NGOs, providers and on-the-ground practitioners. We believe that complex problems should be addressed from a number of perspectives, and that understanding different layers of interest can only lead to more effective practice and better collaboration. We are happy to define a CoP community as those with different levels of interest and expertise in a domain. In this instance, the higher level value trumps the practicality of a focus on implementation or practice.



BRIDGE is confident that our convenings across the different focus areas still meet the general principles and outcomes which underpin the idea of communities of practice, and we see value in both face-to-face and virtual CoPs. These three major learning questions kick off our menu of deliberations on the changing nature of CoPs: our task is to understand some of the new dynamics in this changing CoP landscape, and to find ways of addressing these. We hope that our own stakeholder community and beyond will join the conversation.