**Communities of Practice as Levers for Instructional Change**

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**Key Statement:** This article highlights communities of practice as a means for supporting faculty as they seek to( re)design courses with equitable, research-informed practices.

**Keywords:** Communities of Practice, DEIB, Course (Re)Design

**Introduction**

Creating systemic change in higher education requires attention to multiple facets and structural layers at the individual and “small network” levels. Faculty can find themselves isolated or lacking support for instructional innovations due to factors such as historical norms of teaching, lack of appreciation for teaching in relation to research productivity, and risk of innovation failure in tenure-track positions. Best practices in faculty development call for ongoing, relevant, and discipline-specific support. Collaboration is vital; however, depending on institutional types (e.g., R1, community college) and size, finding like-minded peers and resources to develop, enact, and reflect upon evidence-based instructional practices may be difficult. To address this challenge, we share one story and a toolkit of resources from a network of communities of practice that has brought together faculty to address instructional effectiveness.



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**One Promising Structure:**

**Communities of Practice**

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are defined as “groups of people who share a common concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). CoPs are grassroots, informal organizations that identify common goals, develop and share resources, and collaborate with the hope of fostering transformational change. CoPs can function within departments or within and across colleges, institutions, and regions. In fields with deeply rooted expectations of instructional practice (e.g., mathematics), facilitating change is challenging because it disrupts cultural norms (hooks, 1994; Gehrke & Kezar, 2017). CoPs offer a more attainable, and less overwhelming, approach to defying the “norm” with like-minded peers. Further, CoPs provide opportunities for members to have a voice in determining how their small groups are organized and function (Drane et al., 2019).

While CoPs are promising structures for creating change, they do face challenges with sustainability and external legitimacy. If CoPs are deemed “successful,” groups begin to ask, “Are we still viable?” and/or “Where do we go from here?” CoPs can become entrenched in their own vision and direction and miss opportunities for new partnerships with larger organizations or formalized networks. Recently, a group of mathematics educators in higher education, loosely connected within regional CoPs, joined together as a larger network of communities. The network approach positions these CoPs as drivers toward more expansive transformative change at a national level. In the following sections, we unpack this innovative network model to (a) examine how the network supports both the regional CoPs and individual participants in its design and (b) identify tools that can help others interested in developing similar transformative models.

**The Case of the COMMIT Network**

The COMmunities for Mathematics Inquiry in Teaching (COMMIT) Network [<https://www.comathinquiry.org/>] is a National Science Foundation–funded project invested in connecting CoPs of mathematics faculty in higher education. This network serves as a bridge between individual faculty and the regional CoPs within which they find support. It is designed to provide structures, resources, and opportunities for regional leaders that facilitates a common vision for embedding justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion into transformative mathematics teaching and learning. The COMMIT Network allows regional leaders to organize meetings to discuss issues pertinent to their CoP while being guided by an overarching vision and support structures through the Network. For example, the Network houses a toolkit of resources to help regional communities launch CoPs with localized norms and systematic ways of functioning and communicating (e.g., listserv, website; see https://www.comathinquiry.org/toolkit).

A key benefit of the COMMIT Network is the ability to connect smaller groups and individuals who are collaborating on similar ideas and issues together. When individuals become a member of a COMMIT, they suddenly have access to peers and experienced faculty in their region as well as the national network. Frequently, faculty meet at conferences or other professional events, but lack formal ways to sustain future collaborations. COMMITs and the broader Network have the potential to impact faculty engagement in transformative change within and across institutions or organizations, establishing both loose and strong ties among members.

At the individual level, COMMIT Network members express value in attending activities and sharing resources related to active learning and inquiry (Gomez Johnson et al., 2021). The key contributor to this value is connecting with other faculty across their region and not feeling isolated in this work. Regional leaders reported value in sharing resources about creating new communities, developing systems and structures for regular meetings and events, and roles and transition plans for leadership (Jakopovic & Gomez Johnson, 2023). Both for COMMIT specifically, and CoPs in general, collaboration among communities affords opportunities for leaders to learn from one another and fosters a sense of collective identity and legitimacy among members.

***Getting Started: Building Your CoP***

Both a benefit and challenge of the network structure is supporting communities when they are starting at different stages and developing at different rates. While some CoPs are well-established and can onboard new faculty with ease, others are still forming their identity and examining how to share practices and determine their unique needs and assets. The COMMIT Network provides support in the form of a toolkit developed based on “lessons learned” from the founding CoPs to help new communities get started and sustain. This toolkit (located at: <https://www.comathinquiry.org/toolkit>), although aimed at CoPs for mathematics faculty, provides ideas and resources that could support the development of communities in other areas as well. The six key areas of focus are:

1. purpose and plan,
2. membership base,
3. leadership team,
4. events and activities,
5. communication and technology, and
6. finances.

Leaders from COMMITs recognized the importance of having a clear vision and sense of purpose for their communities to create systems and structures and make decisions that are coherent. The toolkit provides resources for new CoP leadership teams, including guiding questions for consideration and case studies to help those hoping to launch a community. It also offers questions and suggestions for growing a membership base. These questions are meant to provoke brainstorming along with consideration of some of the challenges others have faced, such as supporting diversity and inclusion in their region.

***Staying Strong: Sustaining Your CoP***

Although membership and community growth are important, growing in a sustainable way is vital. The Network aims to have systems in place so that changes in leadership do not disrupt CoP progress or sustainability. For example, COMMIT leaders have identified the importance of having regularly scheduled meetings and events and effective systems for communication and dissemination of content and activities across the community. Without these components in place, the sustainability of the CoP is in jeopardy. Related to this, although some meetings and events can be hosted with little to no cost, it is often helpful to have funding sources to support ongoing initiatives within the CoP, particularly if faculty do not have funding to travel to and attend events outside their institution.

All COMMITs, regardless of their stage of development, identify the power of collaboration as essential to their development and sustainability. The network model has shifted the sometimes monumental concept of transformational change from the responsibility of individual faculty or informal communities toward a mindset that “we’re all in this together” by connecting CoPs and individuals and offering resources and support.

**Implications**

The COMMIT Network provides a glimpse into the potential that a CoP network model could offer disciplines and organizations working to grow, transform, and sustain. We have offered suggestions and resources for others wishing to pursue similar work, recognizing that benefits of the network include leveraging institutional knowledge and resources by:

* providing structures and tools for new regional communities to launch and develop systems and processes;
* connecting existing communities for idea exchange and camaraderie;
* recruiting and intentionally diversifying membership;
* helping individual CoPs move toward sustainability; and
* creating a sense of collective identity and legitimacy among members.

As one leader summarized, “For me this has been a wonderfully rich professional opportunity . . . . This is the go-to place for support . . . , it would be exciting for people across the nation to have communities that support them in this way.”

**Questions for Discussion**

1. What communities of practice or similar professional learning organizations do you participate in currently? How are they structured and how does that seem to influence their value to members?
2. If you are interested in starting a community of practice, which of the key focal areas above do you feel most prepared to initiate? Which would require the most support or resources to be sustainable?
3. What factors mentioned in this article or from your experience are most relevant to communities of practice you see professionally or personally? What might you share or take away to your work/life?

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