Griffith Learning and Teaching Academy
Learning and Teaching Communities of Practice

FACT SHEET

What is a Community of Practice?
A community of practice (CoP) approach to teaching and learning in higher education provides a space for staff to collaboratively reflect, review and regenerate their current teaching and learning practices. Communities of practice grow, or are fostered, to provide a shared space around shared interests and concerns. Members come together to deepen their knowledge and expertise in an area by interacting on an ongoing basis.

Why is Griffith Learning and Teaching Academy promoting the development of CoPs?
The Academy Steering Committee is seeking to develop models for communication and collaboration in order to achieve the Academy’s vision of enhancing and recognising excellence in learning and teaching through collaborative and scholarly practice.

CoPs have been proposed as a way to embed a culture where teachers have opportunities to share ideas, collaborate and develop collective pedagogical knowledge. It is proposed that a small number of CoPs be established and existing CoPs strengthened within each Academic Group. These CoPs will be comprised of Academy members, and other interested staff. The Steering Committee referenced the well established Health Institute for the Development of Education And Scholarship (Health IDEAS), which was formulated in 2009 to promote learning and teaching quality and scholarship across the Health Group, as one example of a range of existing models in place within the Groups that could be built upon.

Identifying a Community of Practice
CoPs may look very different, depending on their stage of development. Key features include:
- a **domain** of knowledge that creates common ground and a shared identity
- a **community** of people who care about the domain and come together to share and develop practice
- a **shared practice** that helps to enhance the capabilities and practices of the CoP members

CoPs can be entirely organic and bottom-up, or they can be cultivated strategically. They can occur within, across, or outside specific organisational areas.

Which types of domains / interests / concerns lend themselves to CoP approaches?
CoPs can be established about any topic of shared interest where members have a shared interest, and feel that regular interaction and sharing may be of benefit to their learning and development of their practice. Members set the specific priorities of their CoP. In choosing domains / interests/ concerns, **alignment with strategic interests** may be beneficial (e.g., links with Group / university L&T aims, finding champions and sponsors among university leadership).
Starting a Learning & Teaching Community of Practice

Based on research conducted through her ALTC Fellowship on building successful communities of practice, McDonald (2014) outlines some key considerations for the initiation phase. The below information is adapted from McDonald’s Community of Practice Start-up Considerations ALTC resource.

1. Finding “the spark” and topic/cohort focus
   The idea/challenge/opportunity determines whether the CoP will be topic based e.g., “Tablet PC CoP”, or cohort based, “Faculty of Business First Year Course Leaders CoP”.

   Key questions: What is the idea, challenge or opportunity triggering the plan to establish the CoP? What is the spark?

2. Determining scope and context
   Once the spark has been agreed upon, the next step is to determine the CoP context, and articulate the alignment with institutional goals and priorities, which can help the CoP achieve its aims. Wenger, McDermontt & Snyder (2002) explain that defining the scope of the domain for a community of practice should “elicit … the heart-felt interests of members and align with important issues for the organisation as a whole”.

   Key questions: What are the needs, challenges and interest areas for your Group? How do these align with the Academy and University learning and teaching goals and priorities?

3. Identifying champions and sponsors
   McDonald recommends identifying champion/s and sponsors to promote and protect the CoP. These are individuals in organisational leadership roles who can provide strategic and / or operational support, and ‘open doors’ for the CoP.

   Who would be a champion / sponsor for your CoP? What could their involvement be?

4. Setting up the CoP
   CoP facilitators can undertake a number of leadership roles, including supporting members to decide on the CoP’s focus, scope and activities, advocating for and promoting the CoP, facilitation of development of the administrative arrangements, facilitating communication and conversation. McDonald recommends co-facilitation to help with

   Some logistical questions to consider include:
   1. Who will be the facilitators?
   2. When and where will the CoP meet?
   3. How will the meetings run?
   4. What financial and administrative implications are there?
5. How will the CoP communicate? – establishing an Office 365 Group Team site, a Yammer Group or a Team within Microsoft Teams. Griffth’s collaboration tools are detailed here.

6. Where will the CoP digital resources be kept?

5. Growing the membership
Communities of practice vary in size depending on their focus and scope. An important topic of discussion for the foundational members will be how many members they would like to have, and what the composition of the CoP should be. CoPs often build membership on the basis of existing informal networks, inviting new members who are likely to contribute actively, build community and add new ideas and perspectives (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

Key questions: Who would be interested in the topic (if topic based domain), or who are members of the cohort (if cohort based)? How will they be recruited?

References and Resources


