

## Community of Practice Guidelines and Resources

### What is a Community of Practice?

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A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people who “share a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Etienne Wenger). The idea behind a CoP is that through the process of sharing experiences and knowledge with others, we enable dialogue among members and begin to explore new possibilities and new ways of doing something.

The hope for each Communities of Practice is that it will offer opportunities for self-reflection, a deepening of the understanding of practice and in doing so support professional and personal development.

### Communities of Practice in the Context of ECE

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Wherever you find yourself on the path as an educator, there is a correlation between reflective practice and long-term retention within the field. This provokes us to move towards “critical reflection that involves thinking individually and with others about fundamental beliefs and understandings, to consider how these have shaped how we view the world.” (Ministry of Education, Early Learning Framework pg.35)

- Communities of Practice provide a unique and powerful invitation for Early Childhood Educators to:
- Connect with other educators
- Create a network of support
- Seek multiple perspectives from a range of educators
- Bring a collective together with a common shared understanding
- Offer opportunities for deep reflection on pedagogy
- Hold ourselves and each other to the shared commitment of growth and opportunity

### CoP Structure

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Most CoP groups require a facilitator role, or perhaps a shared role with co-facilitators. Determine the number of participants that may be invited to your group (10-20?). How would you describe the group, what are your goals and what are you hoping to work on? Monthly sessions can be planned and topics identified. Some may choose to function as a professional book club. The sessions provide opportunities to learn, develop and put into action, with purpose and intentionality, a new complex way of thinking and doing. It is an opportunity to challenge ourselves, to explore new ways of thinking, to wonder about how we show up with young children in our settings and a chance to think more deeply about our practice.

## Community of Practice Guidelines and Resources

### Role of the CoP Facilitator

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This role is multifaceted but primarily it is all about relationships. You are the key contact for all participants who may be from very different backgrounds and experience.

Here are some tried and proven strategies to support your role as facilitator:

- **Set up the environment** for the CoP (see key considerations below for some ideas on doing that)
- **Set the agenda** for the first meeting and have all materials ready for the discussion you will facilitate.
- **Distribute an outline** of each session and how they will develop over the course of the project.
- **Foster new relationships** between community members. If you need to get to know your participants ahead of time take the time to do that (maybe a quick phone conversation or a brief questionnaire). Take time to introduce everyone and allow time for people to connect. Even in groups that know one another well we encourage you to think about how they could grow their relationships into more meaningful / deeper space.
- **Consider the issue of confidentiality** - make this a safe space for discussion and vulnerability, not for judgement.
- **Facilitate the conversations.** This can be trickier than it seems. In every group there is usually some people with a lot to say and some who have a harder time finding their voice. Your role is to ensure there is a balance of voices. The notion of a "Brave Space" as described by Ann Pelo and Margie Carter in their book "From Teaching to Thinking" may be a helpful concept to introduce and discuss: "We need our communities to be brave spaces – brave, because we are going to be vulnerable and exposed. Brave, because we are going to take risks with each other. Brave, because there will be conflict and discomfort and rigorous challenge"
- **Clearly identify the CoP values.** It may be helpful for the group to decide on a common set of values in the first session and to make those visible at every session as a way to stay accountable.
- **Follow-up with everyone** after each session by sending a follow up email thanking them for their commitment for the evening and to remind them of any homework.
- **Touch base between sessions** – you will know your group and what they need.
- **Connect with your mentor** after each session for a quick chat. This is a valuable opportunity for all facilitators to debrief, ask questions, ask for guidance and support. Remember your mentors are here to support you.
- **Maintain records** of attendance and expenses and any data required for the project funders.

## Community of Practice Guidelines and Resources

### Key Engagement Strategies for CoP

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- Send a welcome email with all necessary details (time, venue, parking, to bring etc.)
- Consider the space you will be meeting in. Is it inviting, relaxed, comfortable for adults?
- Have a welcome table with sign in sheet. We suggest you give journals or notebooks to participants to document their journey – Documenting the journey can be quite powerful.
- Offer a light snack appropriate for the time of day and water/coffee/tea
- Wear name tags for the first session facilitates relationship building
- Stick to your start and end times.
- Set up a communication strategy (email, Facebook, What's App – whatever works best in your context).
- Stay in touch between CoP sessions.
- Be in touch with your assigned Mentor after each session.
- Send reminders. Communicate with your members at minimum 2 days before each session
- **Invite Reflection.** Reflection is an important part of CoP. Time for participants to reflect on themselves, and to share back with the group. Having journals for each participant shares the importance of reflecting and its value in this journey.

### Interactions Outside the CoP

- What reading can further the discussion or focus of the session
- What would you hope the group might consider when not together?
- How can you support maintaining connections between CoP's (i.e. WhatsApp groups, pairing people, assignments?)

## Community of Practice Guidelines and Resources

### Developing a CoP Online

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Cultivating a Community of Practice online requires additional attention to rules of engagement and inclusive communication strategies. Consider the following ideas and resources if you are considering developing a CoP online.

1. Set the tone.
2. Post questions with scenarios.
3. Be specific about how ideas are to be shared.
4. Summarize participants' responses. Use information to form the next round of questions.

#### 1. Set the tone

- Personalize the space with your biography, introductions and profile pictures.
- Provide timely responses to posts (usually within the day).
- Nobody likes to go first. Get two people (other moderators) to respond to the question.

#### 2. Post questions with scenarios to challenge thinking and deepen learning.

Example:

Sandy had to downsize her daycare space from a large multiple purpose room to a classroom on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of a school. She would like to integrate physical activities in a smaller space?

What physical activities could be done in a smaller space?

- a. Describe your specific idea.
- b. Why do you recommend this idea?
- c. If possible, add a link/graphic/set of instructions that would help to illustrate your idea.

## Community of Practice Guidelines and Resources

3. Be specific about how content is to be shared. Model the response you expect.

Example:

There are several small space activities found at this link, <http://www.hpepublichealth.ca/sites/default/files/F2L%20small%20spaces%20FINAL.pdf> that could be adapted for young children. This is a Canadian source of information and sensitive to cultural demographics within a setting. My favourite activity is “Get down” which allows students to move and crouch down in response to the leader’s call. I tried this activity indoors using half the daycare space (away from painting easels) and it worked really well. This activity can also be used with music too. I challenged the children to try and crouch and extend all in the same spot. See page 2 of the above link for more information.

4. Summarize participants’ responses and use what is shared to form the next round of questions.

- Look for patterns and themes in the participants’ responses and questions.
- Describe connections between the ideas shared.
- Post a summary outlining the ideas the links that were shared.

## Community of Practice Guidelines and Resources

### References and Resources

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Continuous Professional Learning, Communities of Practice <https://www.college-ecce.ca/en/Documents/CPL%20Resource-Communities-Of-Practice.pdf>

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