

Caring for our communities of practice in educational development

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Abstract

Given the backdrop of multiple concurring crises—a global pandemic, political instability and violence, and multiple structural inequalities—we see the problem of now as this: How do educational developers continue to address the wicked problems in teaching and learning when we are simply so exhausted? Our article presents the importance of communities of practice for educational developers, inviting us to witness and name the communities in which we belong; the important functions they engage; who they nurture and how; and what care is undertaken to sustain these groups and ourselves. To help educational developers understand and appreciate the ways that communities of practice support our work (emotionally, professionally, and socially), we share a framework from the literature of organizational management and apply it to communities in educational development. We include narratives to demonstrate this framework in action to amplify the particularly important role these groups have played in our professional and personal lives. We end with actions we can take to care for our communities of practice that build upon the presented theoretical foundation. As these groups are fragile, maintaining our communities is important so that they will provide us support and shelter into the post-pandemic future.

Keywords: communities of practice, professional development, belonging, crisis response

Reflecting on our experiences during this especially tumultuous period of history, we have become interested in the problem of emotional support within educational development. Educational developers are often alone at their institutions, being the only ones who do exactly what they do. This sense of isolation compounds the challenge of how educational developers address what Bass (2020) called “wicked problems” in teaching and learning: equitably applying what is known about learning so education helps create a more just and sustainable future. One area Bass did not address was the emotional and relational toll that taking on these complex challenges has on us as practitioners—questions of how we are able to sustain ourselves and overcome isolation while pursuing solutions to the challenges we face. Imad (2021) reflects on the importance of care and well-being in the practice of educational development, writing that we “help engage faculty members in supporting and improving the design and development of inclusive and equitable student learning experiences” (p. 1), the wicked problems Bass presented.

Faculty members, postdoctoral scholars, and graduate students study and teach about human challenges (e.g., war, famine, poverty, social inequity, climate change, species loss, recovery from natural disasters), which van Dernoort Lipsky and Burk (2009) call out as traumatic, leaving people feeling hopeless, insufficient, and ineffective. Educational developers—people who care for *these* frontline teachers and researchers—can experience secondary trauma in witnessing the suffering of our clients and in helping them manage emotions (Bessette & McGowan, 2020; Imad, 2021; van Dernoort Lipsky & Burk, 2009). We, too, experience burnout, compassion fatigue, exhaustion, reduced efficacy, depersonalization, and reduced sense of skill and agency in our care for others (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Maslach & Jackson, 1981), making our own care its own wicked problem.

In this backdrop, we see the problem of now as this: How are educational developers able to continuously address the challenges in teaching and learning when we are simply so exhausted? How might we overcome the challenges of local isolation in our work to find the psychic and emotional energy to solve the wicked problems that drew us into the field?

Educational development in higher education is a unique space of working with and in these challenges where we need not compete with one another to succeed in our profession. Inter-institutional collaboration, facilitated by this absence of competition, allows us to address issues in teaching and learning that transcend our campuses. Communities of practice (CoPs)—a shared space with people of similar interests, values, and experiences—are structures where we can feel agency in addressing wicked problems that help provide the emotional, professional, and social support needed to tackle these wicked problems. In the literature of organizational management, “communities of practice” is the name for this type of collective: a found group of others like yourself that is more than a work team or a network of colleagues that has long been an important vehicle by which knowledge is shared within and beyond institutions (Wenger et al., 2002). These organizational structures are known in educational development generally, where CoPs are used by name in educational training and reform (Cambridge, 2001; Gehrke & Kezar, 2017; Kirschner & Lai, 2007); are in many ways similar to learning communities that are built for faculty and graduate student instructors (Cox, 2004; de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020; Sherer et al., 2003); and are created by educational developers for their own practice (Hoffmann et al., 2021; Kearns et al., 2018; Korsnack & Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021). However, the literature of educational development lacks a discussion about how CoPs benefit developers and how to sustain them within our field.

Communities of practice require care and attention to flourish (Wenger et al., 2002). Their fragility means we must take intentional action so they are not lost as conditions change and we enter a new normal. We come together to illustrate how important these groups have

been for our own development and growth throughout our careers—even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic—and call our colleagues to act to sustain these communities as we move beyond the pandemic.

We considered our own experiences in communities of practice and wanted to share with you our curiosity about how they function for our own professional and personal development as we continue to work on wicked problems. We dive into this discussion through five questions:

1. What are communities of practice?
2. What can domain look like?
3. What can community look like?
4. What can practice look like?
5. What is care for our CoPs?

We answer the first four questions to provide a framework about these groups by overviewing the management literature of CoPs and the relevance of CoPs to educational development, which helps to fill a gap in the literature on CoPs as they pertain to our field. We unpack what we mean by *communities of practice* because the term has become common within our field and in workspaces in general (Wenger, 2010) and to distinguish CoPs from other structures familiar to educational developers. Within each CoP characteristic—*domain*, *community*, and *practice*—we share vignettes that illustrate how CoPs appear in our field and their importance to our work. Though we will present vignettes under a specific element, we encourage you to sit with each and consider how all of the CoP elements appear in the individual stories, perhaps reminding you of your own experiences in the field. Finally, we discuss what we mean by care and suggest actions to cultivate CoPs that build upon the theory of communities of practice that we present. We invite you to reflect on your own CoPs throughout: to appreciate the ways you are nurtured in these groups, to identify what the community needs for sustenance, and to consider how to care in reciprocity for those needs.

What Are Communities of Practice?

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. (Wenger, 2006, p. 1)

CoPs run the gamut from small to large, informal to institutional, short lived to perpetual (Wenger et al., 2002, pp. 24–25) and may carry a variety of names (e.g., learning communities; p. 23). What these communities have in common is mutual value developed through member interactions and the doing of things together that furthers the group's expertise (pp. 4–5). These communities have long merged professional and social aspects—in the guilds of the Middle Ages to the corporations of today (p. 5)—further facilitating knowledge transfer across the collective through social ties.

Three elements define communities of practice: domain, community, and practice (Wenger, 2006, pp. 1–2). The CoP's *domain* is the shared interest of the group (i.e., what separates this group from others in the same field). These boundaries are not static or necessarily explicitly defined but are collectively and dynamically understood by the CoP's members. *Community* refers to how the members engage with one another and create a sense of mutual commitment. This element moves CoPs beyond a set of knowledge, a practice, or a website that collects the community's work. Because these interactions are mutually defined, communities develop different means of engagement, appropriate for their unique purposes. Finally, *practice* describes the "socially defined ways of doing" in the CoP's domain (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 40). In support of their practice, CoPs produce communally developed resources (Wenger, 1998). These structural elements demonstrate how CoPs differ from other groups with which we may engage professionally. For example, CoPs differ from a functional unit or center in that CoPs have a collectively defined *domain*. CoPs are more than work teams due to their *community*, with optional participation and shared learning as the goal. CoPs transcend

networks by being defined by the group's *practice* in addition to its connections (Wenger, 1998).

Communities of Practice in Educational Development

In educational development, CoPs can form through affinity groups, out of collaborations, or by incidental meetings through networks. Though we may all support instruction, each of us have different interests and expertise, and we seek peers pursuing similar work. This can be seen in POD special interest groups (SIGs); consortia such as the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL); or collectives to which our institutions belong (e.g., BIG10, Ivy Plus). However, these groups alone are not necessarily communities of practice, something we highlight in the narratives shared later in this article.

From our description, CoPs may seem similar to instructor learning communities (LCs). However, while the domains of LCs and CoPs may be similar (topic, concern, professional stage), the two groups differ substantially in their *community* and *practice*. Members of a CoP collectively define how they operate as a community; in comparison, LCs frequently have their structure determined by a facilitator (often an educational developer). Whereas the *practice* within a CoP is more communal, LC participants bring their own projects, apply learning to their contexts, and receive input and feedback from community members (Cox, 2004). While there is significant emphasis on the group's social aspects, the LC's work is more focused at the individual level, primarily benefiting the participating instructor's teaching practice and their students' learning.

Importance and Limitations of Support Provided by CoPs

Within a discipline or institution, communities of practice serve an important role in knowledge transfer. CoPs retain and exchange knowledge through social and contextual means (Wenger, 1998), which

allow for more robust knowledge transfer than between individuals, through tools, or by documents alone (Argote & Ingram, 2000). CoPs also give individuals agency beyond their formal roles and help maintain institutional vitality (Manuti et al., 2017). As these groups are not work or project bound, CoPs can also serve as a home for identities, allowing individuals to find others sharing their values, approaches, or concerns (Wenger et al., 2002).

There are downsides that come with communities of practice, however. Namely, CoPs may have issues of power imbalances between members and with external groups; of community culture and its ties to the group's geography, history, or institutional affiliations; and of accessibility to new members (Roberts, 2006; Wenger, et al., 2002). Because CoPs can perpetuate problems of inequity and access (Roberts, 2006), members will need to practice vigilance to counteract those tendencies. If we look beyond the field of management—with its focus on knowledge transfer and benefits to work organizations—we can explore how CoPs can overcome these challenges; address issues of inequity; and provide social, professional spaces for individuals to thrive.

Because CoPs organize around what matters to the members, they are places of integrity, where participants can experience their whole selves (Palmer, 1998). As intentional communities of care, CoPs can provide a deliberately nurturing, protected, and equitable space for vulnerability, courage, relationship-building, and collective meaning-making (Jordan, 2008). Members engage with curiosity about their own and their colleagues' experiences and support one another's personal and professional development (Donnell et al., 2018). As brave spaces, CoPs support risk-taking, innovation, and connection (Arao & Clemens, 2013; hooks, 1994), important during times of uncertainty, fear, and scarcity, such as that experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. When we each might feel isolated at our institution or persistently working at surge capacity, these sparks of validation, support, and creativity are central to our vitality as practitioners and people.

CoPs can also be vehicles for change (Gehrke & Kezar, 2017). This can include social change that disrupts systems in transgressive ways, “movement against and across boundaries” (hooks, 1994, p. 12). Through praxis—engagement in reflection, learning, practice, and action—community members can transgress norms about who belongs in a community or field, what is pursued, how it is organized, and how it does its work (Drane et al., 2019; Freire, 1968/2000; hooks, 1994). These spaces also can house counter-narratives, carrying stories of people whose experiences are not usually told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In particular, storytelling, testimonials, and witnessing in community are important practices in anti-racist, feminist, and decolonizing movements to re-focus from deficit-based frameworks—what’s wrong, damaged, broken, or problematic—toward desire-based frameworks—what is needed, possible, and functional (Gilmore, 2017; Tuck, 2009).

The Lifecycle of CoPs

As communities of practice are based on voluntary commitment, CoPs can span organizations and roles, with varying relationships to official structures, with different struggles at each stage of development. Considering these as steps of cultivating or nourishing a community may be helpful because CoPs form to actively develop and grow together (Manuti et al., 2017). These stages are summarized in Table 1 (adapted from Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

Initially, a CoP is in its potential stage: finding members, defining its domain, and discovering what is shared (Wenger, 1998). Often these CoPs are unrecognized, invisible to organizations and even their members, and may struggle to organize and grow (Wenger et al., 2002). Once the group begins to flourish, the CoP enters a coalescing stage, where members share mutual connections and interests, define their collective practice, and negotiate their collective community. These CoPs become visible to their membership but may be unknown to those outside (bootlegged from an institutional perspective) (Wenger et al., 2002).

Table 1. Stages of Development for Communities of Practice

Stage of development	Domain	Community	Practice	Institutional relationship
Potential	Undefined	Unconscious	Undeveloped	Unrecognized
Coalescing	Forming	Emerging	Developing	Bootlegged
Active or maturing	Well defined	Energetic	Productive	Legitimized or strategic
Dispersed or stewardship	Shifting	Slowing	Stagnating	Strategic or transformative
Transformation or memorable	Lost or changed	Dispersed or institutionalized	Archival	Transformative or unrecognized

Source: Adapted from Wenger (1998) and Wenger et al. (2002).

Once the group engages regularly and produces artifacts of their practice, the group becomes maturing or active. Here, roles and commitment to the group adapt to change, evolving to continue to nourish its active members. These CoPs may become institutionally legitimized or strategic—recognized by official organizations as valuable or essential or garnering resources for and scrutiny of their activities. As these groups continue to mature, they may become transformative for organizations, able to influence practices beyond those of the members in the group. Maintaining focus on the CoP’s domain as membership grows and organizing its artifacts may become key challenges, and acts of care, at this stage.

Eventually, the energy of the community wanes, and the CoP enters the dispersed or stewardship stage. Though less active, members still engage with one another, mutually maintaining shared knowledge. Eventually, a community of practice will come to the natural end of its useful life. Ending the CoP occurs in many ways—from a change in domain, to a lowered mutual commitment to the community that leads to dissolution, to a change in the practice that makes the group unnecessary. This need not mean that the CoP dissolves in the end, but it instead may become a social group (lost domain) or network (lost practice); become institutionalized (losing its community); or transform into new, distinct groups (through divisions or mergers). Individuals

may find letting go and moving on difficult at this final stage (Wenger et al., 2002).

Since these groups are defined by mutual commitment and engagement, internal leadership is necessary for CoPs to flourish (Wenger et al., 2002). These roles appear across stages of development and tend to solidify as CoPs become mature. Potential roles, some of which may not be seen as traditional leadership positions and may be needed in different ways throughout the community's life span, are described in Table 2 (adapted from Iyer, 2019; Wenger, 1998). We have found that these roles are not only those that occur in the literature describing CoPs (from a management perspective). So,

Table 2. Leadership Roles Present in Communities of Practice

Leadership role [†]	Description
Coordination leaders or frontline responders	Recruits members and builds up the community, able to mobilize resources, networks, and communication for the group
Inspirational leaders or visionaries	Lends thought leadership or expertise to the community, potentially giving a direction or purpose for the group
Organizational leaders or builders	Takes on the day-to-day organization or management of the community's interactions, developing the group's interactions into mutually appropriate structures and processes
Classificatory leaders, storytellers, or artists	Collects and organizes information of the group, helping to document the community's practices and connecting the group to the past to give insight to the present
Interpersonal leaders, healers, or caregivers	Develops the social aspects of the community, working to tend to the needs of individual members and create a group of members who mutually support one another
Institutional/boundary leaders or bridge builders	Liaisons between their community and adjacent communities, institutions, or official organizations, working across differences and divisions
Cutting-edge leaders or disruptors	Speaks up and takes action when potentially risky, often spearheading novel initiatives born out of the group

[†]These names of potential roles are adapted from the literature of CoPs (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) combined with their corollaries in organizations for social change (Iyer, 2019) to demonstrate the generalizability of these leadership positions.

we have combined these leadership roles with those seen in the social justice ecosystem to demonstrate their generalizability.

Looking at Real Communities of Practice

Having outlined the elements, benefits, and stages of communities of practice, we present narratives that describe experiences within CoPs categorized by the three elements of domain, community, and practice. These vignettes are presented neither as guides on how these communities should look—as each CoP develops to fit the mutual needs of its members—nor as scholarly evidence to the effectiveness of the theoretical framework. Instead, we present these stories to illustrate specific ways domain, community, and practice can look as a means to help you appreciate how CoPs can sustain our work in educational development. We invite you to take the time with each vignette to reflect on your own participation in CoPs and to broaden your imagination regarding how CoPs can be.

What Can Domain Look Like?

Domain is the group's shared interest, the communally defined element that separates this CoP from others in a field. Colloquially, sharing a domain is what makes CoP colleagues "our people." As we grow, develop, and find our own work within educational development, the domain of the CoP dynamically updates to continuously represent the interests of the group. Domain can also be thought of as the wicked problem on which a CoP is collectively working to solve. In these vignettes, we highlight two CoPs: the first about finding other early career developers with whom to create a community and the second consisting of a community of leaders developing their own voices. Within these stories, we share how domain helped these group members meet one another, provided them a reason to interact, and formed the basis for their communities of practice.

Finding Other Early Career Practitioners With Whom to Grow

Chris Chen, Senior Assistant Director, Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

When I entered my role in 2017, I quickly found a group of similar colleagues—assistant directors at centers who had recently finished their doctorates—through POD and CIRTl networks. Over time, we formed a community of practice focused on ways to navigate the field as new practitioners. Specifically, we discussed our transition from graduate students to professional educational developers and explored topics of communal interest that may not have been of immediate need to any of our individual institutions. This community really helped me better understand how to function as a junior member in the field and learn how to grow into my role through our shared experiences and resources. Though we did not meet in person that often—keeping in touch via Slack or Zoom meetings between conferences—we were always able to rely on one another for career and professional advice and collaborations on teaching and learning projects. We developed handouts, workshops, posters, and presentations together over the past three years that would not have happened without the community.

These efforts really came together when a subset of our community proposed and developed a CIRTl network course on online workshop development for graduate students in spring 2020. We had previously collaborated on smaller projects, shared an interest in online teaching, and wanted to empower graduate students to provide peer teaching development, so this project was a natural output of our shared domain. Our course proved timely with the rapid shift to remote teaching and learning, providing materials, activities, and frameworks for online teaching that modeled what we could do to support online teaching at our home institutions.

Beyond developing a course on online teaching, this community of practice has become even more valuable to me during the COVID-19 pandemic. The group provided important emotional,

social, and professional support throughout 2020. I always look forward to reaching out for help in understanding situations affecting all of us, unpacking tricky situations occurring in our individual contexts, or just unwinding together after a hard day's work. Having an external set of colleagues on which to rely has truly helped keep up my spirits as we, together, furthered our practice during uncertain times.

Nurturing Our Own Leadership

Denise Leonard, Associate Director of Educational Development, Center for Teaching and Learning, Washington University in St. Louis

My pathway into this career field was through an HHMI postdoctoral fellowship that gave me dual responsibilities of helping faculty with curricular innovations and working with graduate students and post-doctoral fellows learning pedagogical approaches in their current or future role of teaching. In this new role, I grew adept at applying my PhD research/scholarly training to new research findings in active learning and cognitive science and translating this research into evidence-based teaching strategies for college classrooms. I enjoyed helping others reflect on and refine their own teaching approaches. Yet a few years later and one year into my role as an associate director, I was uncertain and doubtful about how to navigate the leadership transitions and shifting priorities in our center.

As a leader in my center, I was longing to find others who could sympathize, understand what I was experiencing, and share/brainstorm in a safe and nonjudgmental way. The 2018 POD Network Conference in Portland was my connector to two colleagues who found themselves supporting their centers during challenging times while transitioning to new roles, and together we formed a small peer mentoring group. Being involved in a community of practice around leadership and supporting emerging leaders provided me with a critical form of professional development in leadership that isn't typically offered to those in this field.

What distinguishes this community from others is the focus on leadership in educational development and how women prepare themselves for leadership roles that value transparency and vulnerability. The three of us formed a small peer mentoring accountability group that met once a month via Zoom, where we explored topics such as vulnerability in leadership, trust, and our identities as leaders. We shared our professional challenges and celebrated unexpected wins. We allowed our personal lives with its various challenges into our conversation too. The friendship and support were immense when I had to vacate my apartment suddenly due to asbestos mitigation. Collectively, our need to share, unload, and engage in self-care shaped the formation of a yearlong mentoring circle in which we gave ourselves permission to be vulnerable with our insecurities but acknowledge our strengths and gifts so that, in turn, we could bring those gifts and strengths back to our work groups.

Each one, teach one. This motto has reminded me of my responsibilities to share lessons learned and words of wisdom with those who come after me. The community of practice circle that I started out in late 2018 continues to expand and grow. The work of our mentoring circle manifested in a co-facilitated roundtable at POD 2019, where I modeled what speaking from one's heart means in order to encourage and mentor new emerging leaders in the POD Network. This conversation on leadership has since welcomed new voices and faces. At the 2020 POD Network Conference, I joined with more colleagues to co-facilitate a roundtable session to share continued lessons of patience, honesty, and vulnerability that have sustained me not only in times of leadership transitions but also during a pandemic. I currently co-lead the diversity and outreach subcommittee of POD's Graduate Student, Professional Student, and Postdoctoral Scholar Development (GPPD) special interest group, where I give space for each person to realize their unique leadership identity.

The personal impact that the community of practice had on me was invaluable. From our conversations emerged an important lesson on who I am as a leader in this field, which is that it is perfectly fine

to bring your whole and real self (with tattoos, with afros and natural curly hair, with vulnerability and uncertainties) to your center because your staff, too, need to see examples of authentic and transparent leaders. During changing and tumultuous times, it is truth, authenticity, and vulnerability that make up the foundation and the pathway for more stable, certain times. I am certainly grateful that I found and was invited to be a part of such a special group that reassured me and stabilized me personally and professionally.

What Can Community Look Like?

Community is the mutual commitment that moves a group beyond shared interest into a community of practice. Co-creating these norms and public agreements of engagement allows for a feeling of belonging, permitting the CoP to break away from formal structures and cultures that may exist within individual institutions. This element is not just the outward representations of the community (e.g., its formal structure or web presence) but includes deeper, invisible parts of the cultures of and ways of interacting within the group. The following vignettes show how community can be formed: one discusses an intra-institutional CoP, and the other presents how practitioners created an inter-institutional space that fits their needs. Though these two groups engage themselves very differently, both show how important these interactions are in sustaining their ability to address challenges faced as educational developers.

Creating Intra-Institutional Community to Make Change

Katie Kearns, Assistant Vice Provost for Student Development and Director of the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs, University Graduate School, Indiana University

I have been a member of a community of practice focused on graduate student pedagogical development since 2005, when I started

working as an instructional consultant at a public university in the Midwest. This community consists of five core members, plus many others, across our campus. We have different professional roles across functional and fiscal boundaries—graduate students and faculty in multiple programs and schools, teaching center staff, and administrators—but we share interests in understanding how graduate students develop professional and personal identities and in teaching self-efficacy. Our community also engages in advocacy work, presenting, publishing, talking with leaders, and mentoring former graduate students as they become leaders in their own right. We have worked together for over 15 years now, with waxing and waning energies as interests and energies shift. When one project is spinning down, another is starting. This community has been vital to my own professional and personal development and has led to my involvement in similar “spin-off” communities.

We have a shared ethos about our research process in these communities: we want graduate students’ voices, especially minoritized and marginalized voices, to lead our research questions. Community leadership is intentionally distributed, rotating who is leading a project and based on interest and positioning for public recognition at that moment (e.g., academic job hiring, tenure, promotion, and grant possibilities). The rest of us, at the same time, step up to support that leader’s goals. We have an internal language reflecting how we attend to our work (such as “puke on the page,” as authors are invited to write something, however messy, so that the rest of us can help clarify their ideas). Our project management has internalized habits, such as collective note-taking and collaborative manuscript writing on a shared document. We are invested in one another’s care; we inquire about one another’s well-being and that of our relations; we celebrate members’ accomplishments; and we go out for dinner or meet for a walk on the weekend. Often, we have “spark emails” at 4 am when one of us writes, “I thought of something for our project” or “Right now is hard, how are you REALLY doing?”

I have the privilege of being curious with people across disciplinary boundaries, roles, and academic generations. We work at a pace we can each manage at that time, filling in for each other as needed. Our community co-creates spaces where members can be vulnerable, ask for what they need, try out bold ideas with support, and hold one another accountable to values of mutuality, reciprocity, and belonging.

Building Meaningful Work and Belonging Together

Lynn Eaton, Professor of Education and Director of Faculty Development, Center for Effectiveness in Learning & Teaching, University of Mary Hardin–Baylor

As a first-time POD conference attendee in 2004, I found that nearly everyone seemed ecstatically happy to see one another; everyone seemed to know everyone else (except for me); and there seemed to be great conversations and network coffee sessions, lunches, and dinners, all between friends and colleagues. I wanted to feel and be a part of *that* community. I even asked a highly respected fore-parent of POD for suggestions about how I might become more involved. Her only suggestion was for me to consider joining the Diversity Committee. I was immediately offended, as I saw it as a suggestion of “my place” within the organization. After I attended the conference for the third or fourth time, I began to feel purposefully ignored and excluded. Why purposefully? I am not quite sure. But as a person of color, it may have been due to the scarcity of annual attendees who looked like me.

In 2015, I received a call from another member of POD who, like me, was a person of color. I had never met him, but he called to ask if I’d be interested to serve on the POD Annual Conference Planning Committee. He specifically said that because I was a person of color (an African American), he thought that I could add value to the planning process. I couldn’t believe his *intentionality*. He suggested that it might be a way to create change within the process and to engage more people of color as POD members. As a person of color,

I recognized that POD has a largely white membership, which mirrors the field of educational development, but I wondered if we could transform the network with a group focused on creating more pathways for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) members to become more engaged in POD. I was quickly excited about this.

As a member of the conference planning team, the core of this community of practice, we had weekly Zoom meetings for a full year. During that time, I felt more connected within POD than ever before by taking part in this caring community. We shared personal stories, laughs, and many words of encouragement. That was important to me. On a professional level, we noticed that the same people usually coordinated the proposals and session review process. I suggested that we give those people brief terms (two years), then invite other members to serve. Clearly, this would invite more participation in the process. This seemingly small change left me with a feeling of community accomplishment. During our time together, we continued to seek additional changes to the conference planning process that would create more of these pathways for engagement.

After serving our terms on the committee, we continue to stay in touch, often re-connecting at the POD conference, where we warmly greet one another and find time to chat. We continue to support one another. We even encouraged one another to seek positions on the Core Team (POD's governing board) and sought out new colleagues to empower us to run for other leadership positions. Each of us in the original group has served, or is currently serving, on the Core Team. Through such encouragement and service, I have discovered the importance of inviting and encouraging others to bring their diverse talents and experiences to POD. Doing so will almost always give members the opportunity to join or create a community of practice of their own.

What Can Practice Look Like?

Practice is the co-created ways of doing, the area in which the CoP develops its own artifacts, language, and understanding of its work.

Similar to *community*, the element of *practice* moves the group beyond mutual interest by collaboratively creating something new. The first presented vignette shows the creation of a course for future faculty, which blossomed into a CoP that nourished the participating educational developers by providing opportunities unavailable at their home institutions through the co-creation of course materials that could be shared. The second vignette shows how a CoP can adapt quickly to the shift to remote teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 to collectively produce guidance as to how to address the current challenges. Though these stories differ in result, the shared goals that are present in both demonstrate the importance of practice to CoPs.

Creating Space for Both Future Faculty and Educational Developer Growth

Darren Hoffmann, Assistant Professor of Anatomy and Cell Biology, Carver College of Medicine, University of Iowa

For two years, I have been part of a community of practice that is collaborating to implement a cross-institutional course design program for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. This collaboration was born from an easy conversation at a national meeting where we, originally a group of six graduate developers from across the United States, shared dinner, our experiences, and our interests. We wondered what might happen if we worked together, and, within days, we hatched a plan to make this conversation a shared goal. This community of practice has grown to 18 collaborators.

From the start, we recognized that this collaboration was more than an opportunity to teach our graduate learners. We were co-creating a nurturing environment to grow together as professionals in graduate student development. We each brought different contexts and experiences that benefited the community. I was a faculty member who enjoyed doing graduate development work as a passion but who had no training in educational development and very little sense

of its disciplinary norms and language. Other community members included a dean of a graduate school, leaders of teaching centers, and graduate students considering careers in educational development. We shared a desire to collaborate across institutions, to break from our typical work environments—which were often quite isolating—and to build collaborative, courageous relationships that went beyond the more guarded interactions we typically experienced at national meetings. Importantly, we also found common identity as a group of individuals who prefer to first focus on the quality of the processes and experiences we create and allow that positive energy to lead to the paper, the grant, or the presentation.

We structured our interactions so that every member had a voice and could learn from one another. Meetings ran from the informal, focused on relationship-building, to the highly organized, focused on moving shared program goals. These meetings were fundamentally different from those with teams on my campus or within my disciplinary field. In our community of practice, power and leadership were shared, and everyone could contribute to the decision-making. We curated our meetings and communications in a shared drive, which now serves as a repository for workshop activities for future programs. Some team members identified particular topical strengths and contributed recorded presentations, gifting artifacts of their expertise.

These interactions around a concrete project are critical for me. Our attitude of connecting as we collaborate showed me that I can learn from everyone with whom I collaborate. This is different from a course or journal club, where my motivation is typically more focused on what I can get from the content rather than from the community. This community of practice has perhaps most influenced how I work with colleagues outside the group. Our shared leadership approach showed me that I can create similar spaces when I manage a team at my own institution.

The vulnerability that came with working on this ambitious, adventurous project together made our group close in both professional and

personal ways. During the COVID-19 pandemic, so much of our usual work felt like damage control. A community that felt like fun, which came from our own passion and curiosity, was a healing experience.

Collaborating to Rapidly Address Teaching Challenges During the Pandemic

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The POD STEM SIG Mastermind group that I joined at the end of the 2018 POD Network Conference was one of the most important, energizing, and inspiring components of my work over the next two years as the associate director for science at the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University. It is hard to believe we, the four members of the mastermind group from different universities, were all strangers to one another when we first met and exchanged email addresses at the end of a STEM SIG meeting. Over the next year, we met once a month for about 90 minutes over Zoom, and by the time we met again at the following year's POD conference, we were all best friends and colleagues. While this group was intended to last for a year, we have kept it going as the team has evolved and grown.

Through my work at the center, I belonged to an incredible interdisciplinary team of passionate colleagues who cared deeply about the scholarship and practice of higher education. But it could also be challenging to be one of the few members of the staff dedicated to supporting STEM education, as my wonderful and brilliant colleagues primarily had backgrounds in the humanities and social sciences. The POD STEM SIG gave me a community of support that was hyper-focused and experienced in exactly the topics and issues I was working on myself.

With the support of this group, several colleagues from the math and chemistry departments and I wrote and won an internal education innovation grant to explicitly teach students effective learning and

studying strategies during class time. This project was directly inspired by a presentation that another mastermind group member gave at the POD conference, and we shared materials and discussed how to develop our proposal and project over the next year.

Similarly, our monthly meetings allowed us to share ideas, resources, and approaches and to learn about different initiatives we were all trying on our campuses—what worked well and where we could improve. We shared material we were using in workshops and approaches to leading and organizing workshops on different themes as well as emotionally supported one another through all the challenges the job can involve. No matter how work was going, I was always thrilled to see a mastermind meeting on the schedule, knowing I'd get a chance to hear about the fantastic things my colleagues were up to and to ask advice on issues I was struggling with.

In this vein, our group was particularly necessary as the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States during the spring 2020 semester. My university went remote over spring break, so that we had a week or so to figure out how to support science courses as students and instructors scattered from campus. Several colleagues in our group had already begun planning, so it was invaluable just to hear about the problems and solutions they had already come up with, and we spent the rest of the semester meeting and emailing one another resources. The fact that we were all supporting science classes and that we each came from different disciplinary backgrounds meant we each had favorite virtual assets that we could share as we compiled lists of online supports that classes could use to finish the lab components of their courses. Without this group, I would have been flailing trying to support so many different faculty on my campus all looking for different solutions. With this group, I readily had a pretty robust list of resources and examples I could share with faculty from physics, chemistry, math, engineering, etc.

As a group that provides material, intellectual, emotional, and energetic support, the STEM SIG has been a highlight of my work and something I would heartily recommend to anyone else.

What Is Care for Our Communities of Practice?

Though communities of practice are powerful sources of nourishment, CoPs require constant care and individual investment from the membership to thrive (Wenger et al., 2002). Jordan (2008) refers to care as “a mutual practice of giving and receiving,” serving functions that are protective or boundary making (us/not-us) as well as nurturing or growth facilitating (hooks, 2000; Jordan, 2008). A community of care supports the development of “self” (me/not-me), encouraging each member’s growth, vulnerability, courage, and empowerment as they participate in the group’s collective practice. Thus, CoPs acknowledge that there is affective/emotional labor happening within the group, similar to the developer/client work within educational development (Bessette & McGowan, 2020; Imad, 2021). Examples of this in practice can be seen across the vignettes presented in this article, and we would encourage you to review these stories to see aspects of care present in these CoPs and consider how care may look in your own communities.

Recommendations for Caring for Communities of Practice in Educational Development

Principles of care as boundary-tending apply to the elements of the presented community of practice framework: *domain*, *community*, and *practice*. We can be attentive to what exceeds our scope, what interests stretch us too thin or are too ambitious right now, or what limits our imagination of what could be. We can interact in mutuality; feel fairness in our collective participation; and appreciate members’ social position, talents, needs, and limits. We can co-create shared social order, expectations that align with our shared vision, and mechanisms for making decisions and managing conflict.

Drawing from these principles, we recommend three specific ways to help maintain these groups as supportive places for our work (to be a restorative effort instead of an additional burden placed on our

already exhausted selves). As you read through our suggestions, we hope that you may recognize support you are already providing to communities in which you participate as well as gather inspiration for new ways you can care for your communities.

Recognize your participation in and garner legitimization for communities of practice. Since these organizations are enriching, recognizing your own CoPs can help you better care for them. Even if you are not yet comfortable to make your CoP visible (e.g., yours is a brave space for coalition-building and witnessing among people of marginalized identities), working to help your institution understand that it cannot provide everything its educational developers may need to thrive in their work—or even giving them the language of communities of practice—can have a positive effect in CoP participation (Wenger, 1998). This recognition can give you time to engage with your CoPs as a part of your work. We can also lobby our institutions to provide care in the form of resources or support to help our communities thrive (e.g., website support, space for meetings, potential connections to other communities) (de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020; Wenger, 1998).

Reflect on and protect the boundaries of your community of practice. Assessing and refining your CoP's domain, community, and practice is a healthy effort (de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020). Consider how your group balances between its core practice and the boundaries of its domain (Wenger, 2010). Determine what work is being done by the community to sustain it or make it meaningful, who does that labor, and how those members are being recognized. Ideas for roles that may be needed in your community can be found in Table 2. You may also assess how your community is complicit in, reifies, or benefits from systems of privilege as a way to push back against a CoP's natural tendencies to reproduce current structures (Roberts, 2006). Additionally, you may consider how your group can deliberately organize and use its access to privilege to disrupt systems of inequity and oppression as your CoP pursues its collective practice.

Facilitate growth and change. Consider how norms of engagement or the group's domain are not so rigid that they no longer serve or

nourish the community (Manuti et al., 2017). Encourage flexible levels of engagement with the community (Manuti et al., 2017; Wenger et al., 2002) and create ways for the community to interact with external views, expertise, and experiences to keep atop its practice (Manuti et al., 2017; Wenger, 1998). Additionally, be intentional about how you invite new members. As CoPs are organically grown and mutually regulating, members may inadvertently reinforce current structures of inequity (Roberts, 2006), which may lead to diminished external engagement and restricted membership (Wenger et al., 2002) and leave potential members feeling uncomfortable about joining. Inviting new members can also keep the community up to speed on its practice, provide needed energy as the CoP matures, and improve the group's means of engagement as it adapts to accept new recruits (Wenger et al., 2002).

As a final note, know when to let your CoP go. This recommendation may seem counterintuitive to our encouragement of participation in and caring for communities of practice, but part of caring is understanding when the group needs to move on to protect what is good about these CoPs and our own time and energy. Members will naturally come and go, and the community will have to adapt to its shifting needs. Some of this will be an organic part of members' professional growth (e.g., when student participants in the CoP graduate or colleagues move to different roles). When this happens, having the grace to help the community celebrate, honor, give gratitude, and let go can be best for all members.

Conclusion

Communities of practice serve a variety of purposes for educational developers as people and professionals, giving us the structure, safety, and strength to take on the wicked problems we face in our field. From the perspective of institutions, CoPs help to transfer knowledge and develop our practice as educational developers. Personally, these

groups serve a social function of engendering a feeling of belonging within our profession along with rejuvenating our mental and emotional energies for our daily work. Through our discussion of CoPs—what they are, why they matter, and what they can look like—we show how these groups are important to us, especially during tumultuous times. As CoPs require deliberate care to thrive and nourish its membership, we provide three ways you can support your communities: recognizing participation in and gaining recognition for CoPs, reflecting and protecting the boundaries of our communities, and facilitating growth and change within our groups. Beyond this, we encourage you to share the process and work of your CoPs—through formal and informal means—so that we may all see trends in how our communities of practice uniquely support educational development. Together, we can better maintain our communities of practice as safe, slow spaces for learning and doing with colleagues we trust and as places of joy, whether in times of trouble or abundance, as we collaborate to solve whatever wicked problems we collectively face.

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