# Teachers' communities of practice: a toolkit for teachers

**Ecctis**

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CoP | community of practice |
| CPD | continuing professional development |
| PLC | professional learning community |
| SCERT | State Council of Educational Research and Training |
| TAG | teacher activity group |
| TDC | Teacher Development Coordinator |

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# Contents

# Organisations

This communities of practice (CoPs) toolkit was prepared by Ecctis. It builds on the findings from a study co-delivered by Ecctis, British Council India and Centre for Intrinsic Motivation (CIM) that aimed to explore the current state of implementation, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of CoPs in Maharashtra and New Delhi, as well as wider international literature on CoPs and teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). The British Council and CIM have significant experience in implementing CoPs as a CPD model for teachers in India and beyond. Ecctis was commissioned by the British Council to conduct research and management of the project and develop a toolkit for teachers on how to plan, establish, run and sustain CoPs for their CPD. For more information around the methodology of the project and how this toolkit was developed, please refer to section 1.3 *How has the CoP toolkit been prepared?*

## Ecctis

Ecctis is a gold-standard provider of solutions and services in international education, training and skills, and in the development and recognition of globally portable qualifications. It is an internationally trusted and respected reference point for qualifications and skills standards. Ecctis has built a 20-year track record in international consultancy and development. Through successful delivery of an extensive portfolio of projects during this period, Ecctis has developed and refined robust and dynamic methodologies, with expertise in credential evaluation, benchmarking and mapping, as well as delivering research, evaluation and benchmarking projects seeking to improve the quality of K-12 education systems worldwide. Ecctis has delivered various research projects and evaluations on behalf of British Council India that have specifically sought to raise education quality standards in the country, possessing a robust knowledge of the Indian government school education sector both at primary and secondary levels. Additionally, Ecctis has worked with teachers and conducted research into CoPs in India, possessing a strong understanding of the challenges faced in the teaching profession and the role CoPs can play in increasing education standards overall.

## British Council

The British Council builds connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language. The British Council supports young people to gain the skills, confidence and connection to realise their potential and to participate in strong and inclusive communities.

As part of the British Council's approach which recognises the limitations of isolated conventional, top-down, short-term, large-scale cascade models of in-service teacher education, teacher activity groups (TAGs) have, since 2016, become an established model of CPD in British Council projects all over the world.

# Centre for Intrinsic Motivation (CIM)

Centre for Intrinsic Motivation (CIM), is a flagship initiative of Schools and Teacher Innovating for Results (India), a nonprofit that designs and implements behaviour change initiatives at scale leading to motivating every child, teacher, and official to learn and improve.  The intrinsic motivation of officials and teachers is a key factor in sustaining improvements. CIM's interventions where officials and teachers reflect, give one another feedback, problem-solve together and learn best practices from one another impacts student learning in a sustainable way. CIM's work has improved student learning and in-service teacher training across three states (Delhi, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu) reaching 4.8 lakh teachers and 92 lakh children.

# 1. Overview of the CoP toolkit

This toolkit has emerged from a recognised need for effective teacher continuing professional development (CPD) to transform teaching cultures. Communities of practice (CoPs) have been identified as a valuable tool for this transformation to take place in India and beyond. This toolkit will summarise the evidence of CoPs' effectiveness, as well as providing guidance on and strategies for implementing CoPs.

## 1.1 Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit was designed with education practitioners, such as teachers, teacher educators and/or teacher mentors, in mind, though it is relevant for anyone who is interested and/or involved in a teaching CoP. It aims to equip education practitioners with the understanding to be able to implement key practices that enable CoPs to succeed. It consists of evidence-based guidance, good practices, a planning tool for establishing a CoP, and a range of useful resources to support CoP activities, offering guidance through the stages of **planning, establishing, running and sustaining a successful CoP.**

## 1.2 What is the purpose and scope of the toolkit?

This toolkit offers a starting point for those wishing to deepen their understanding and apply a CoP approach to their work. It aims to provide conceptual clarity, offering practical tips and tools to maximise the value of participation in and engagement with CoPs.

Its purpose is to:

- **Aim 1:** contribute to an understanding of CoPs and their effectiveness in theory and practice

- **Aim 2:** provide a practical toolkit to maximise the value of participation for teachers who would like to take part in CoPs or take on the role of a CoP facilitator.

More specifically, the four key characteristics of the toolkit are illustrated in Figure 1.
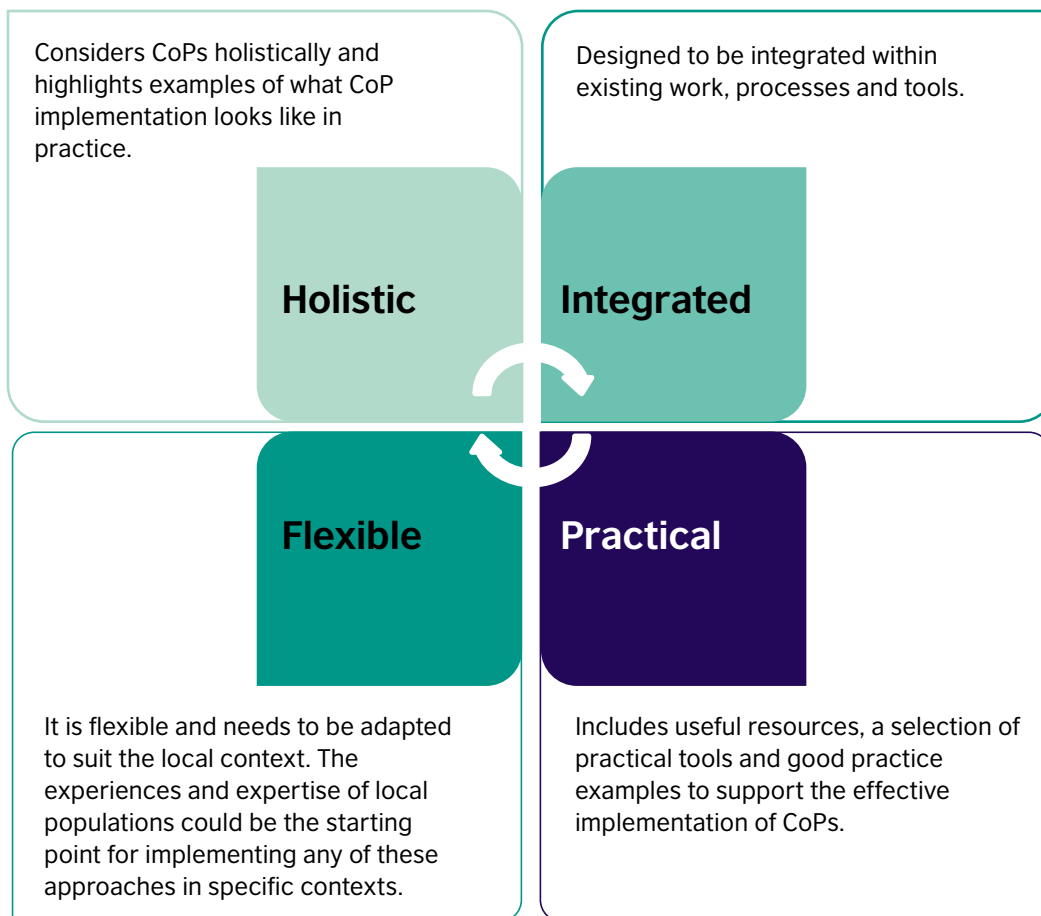
| | |
|---|---|
| Considers CoPs holistically and highlights examples of what CoP implementation looks like in practice.<br><br>**Holistic** | Designed to be integrated within existing work, processes and tools.<br><br>**Integrated** |
| **Flexible**<br><br>It is flexible and needs to be adapted to suit the local context. The experiences and expertise of local populations could be the starting point for implementing any of these approaches in specific contexts. | **Practical**<br><br>Includes useful resources, a selection of practical tools and good practice examples to support the effective implementation of CoPs. |

**Figure 1** The four key characteristics of the toolkit

## 1.3 How has the CoP toolkit been prepared?

This toolkit was developed by triangulating the findings of a review of international literature on teacher CoPs and two research case studies exploring the implementation, impact and sustainability of CoPs in two locations in India: Maharashtra, with a particular focus on reviewing the legacy of the TEJAS project and the teacher activity groups (TAGs), and New Delhi, with a focus on the Teacher Development Coordinator (TDC) project.[1]

During the research, three key elements were identified that form a teachers' CoP and contribute towards its effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

1.  **Purpose (i.e. why the community exists and what it hopes to achieve):** This refers to the main goal and objective of the CoP. Identifying the purpose of the community is important in order to provide an output that is of interest to and in alignment with the goals of the intended members. The purpose of a teachers' CoP can be, for example, to share best practice, to develop innovative ideas and teaching practices, and to increase teachers' awareness of their own CPD.

2.  **People (i.e. who is involved in the community):** This refers to the identification of

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1  Effectiveness of communities of practice for teacher professional development in Maharashtra and New Delhi: A study

and involvement of people who share similar needs and have the necessary commitment to be part of the CoP. Identifying these teachers will result in committed and engaged members of the community who are able to act towards achieving the goals of the CoP. The people that usually participate in a teachers' CoP are teachers, CoP facilitators (who are often teachers) and other education practitioners.

3.  **Practice (i.e. what activities the community conducts and how these are organised):** This refers to the practices, activities and actions conducted within the CoP to help members overcome challenges and maximise the effectiveness of CoP implementation. In a teachers' CoP, the practice focuses on the different activities and practices, but also the various tools and resources that teachers use to overcome potential challenges and improve their teaching practices, ultimately contributing to their CPD.

These three key elements that shape a CoP have informed the development of this toolkit and the guidance presented in the following sections.

# 2. Communities of practice in theory

## 2.1 What is a community of practice?

A community of practice (CoP) is a professional learning community where members share learning and experiences and engage in critical reflection and open dialogue about specific topics, developing their personal and professional identities as part of the process (Jagasia & Baul, 2014). CoPs first emerged in the 1990s in the field of organisational and knowledge management, but have since expanded into other sectors, including education (Wenger, 2011).

Broadly speaking, CoPs – also known as professional learning communities (PLCs) (Borg et al., 2020; Padwad & Dixit, 2008; Zahedi et al., 2021) – consist of groups or networks of individuals who have common interests and engage in discussions and interactions to share learning, knowledge and experiences about common issues. CoPs are distinct from other teams, groups or networks in that their members are often professionals 'who share a passion for something that they know how to do, and who interact regularly in order to learn how to do it better' (Wenger, 2004).

According to Wenger (1998: 2), CoPs are generally characterised by:

- 'Joint enterprise', meaning all members share a common goal and vision that is understood by all
- 'Mutual engagement', meaning members of a CoP actively interact with each other and form social relationships
- 'Shared repertoire', which indicates the common resources, materials, technology and shared language used by CoP members.

In the education sector, CoPs are widely implemented in teachers' education and as CPD initiatives. Generally, they aim to support teachers' learning and professional development in teaching, learning and pedagogical and assessment approaches by promoting and making space for peer-to-peer discussions and collaborative activities (Wenger, 2011).

Brouwer et al. (2012) define a teaching community as 'a group of teachers who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and share and build knowledge with a group identity, shared domain goals and interactional repertoire'. A shared repertoire refers to the sharing of teaching

**Joint enterprise**

**Mutual engagement**

**Shared repertoire**

knowledge, techniques, ideas and materials (Akerson et al., 2009).

Therefore, being part of a CoP is a continuous, ongoing, voluntary and bottom-up process that enables knowledge and learning to be co-constructed through participants' interactions and collective participation (Jagasia & Baul, 2014).

The central idea behind a teacher CoP is to provide an effective way to increase teachers' learning and professional development. To this end, the primary focus of CoPs is to enable teachers to share best practices in teaching, learning and assessment and develop a support network that would allow them to discuss potential issues and solutions to problems they face in the classroom, for example around the topics of teaching and assessment practices, classroom management, students' social and emotional support and well-being, subject-specific teaching and assessment practices and other topics. Additionally, the aim of CoPs is to support teachers to generate new knowledge and develop new and innovative teaching, learning and assessment strategies that can emerge from teachers' interaction and sharing of learning and experiences.

## 2.2 Why should you consider CoPs?

The following list provides some of the reasons why teachers could consider CoPs for their learning and professional development.

1. CoPs have been acknowledged as a potential **alternative to conventional models of teacher education and professional development.**

2. Being involved in a community **enables knowledge or resources to be shared,** supports the **collaborative generation of new knowledge** and establishes a **social network**, providing opportunities for teachers to express themselves and engage in discussions.

3. Research supports that participating in CoPs has a variety of **positive impacts** for those involved.

Studies show that participating in CoPs has a number of advantages for those involved. As teaching improves, students benefit too. In addition, evidence suggests that the presence of a community promotes a longer-term, more systemic, impact, influencing teaching culture within schools and even reaching teachers who are only indirectly involved in CoPs. An overview of the benefits alongside the evidence-based changes and impact observed for different stakeholders as a result of community involvement is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Overview of the impact of CoP involvement on teachers, CoP facilitators and students

| Stakeholder group | Impact on knowledge, skills and soft skills |
|---|---|
| Teachers | • Develop knowledge, skills and competencies<br>• Improved collaboration and interpersonal communication<br>• More confident and motivated<br>• Increased awareness around professional development<br>• Stronger focus on student achievement<br>• Make changes to classroom practice (more student-centred)<br>• Experience a sense of belonging<br>• Change attitudes and beliefs |
| CoP facilitators | • Develop knowledge, skills and competencies<br>• Improved confidence and interpersonal skills<br>• Offered CPD opportunities<br>• Beneficial for career development |
| Students | • Improved academic outcomes<br>• Students are more enthusiastic about and involved in their learning<br>• Increased confidence and self-belief<br>• Increased engagement in lessons<br>• Improved attendance |
| Teachers not participating in CoPs | • More interest in adopting new teaching methods<br>• Benefit from CoP members sharing learning and resources |

# 3. Implementing communities of practice

## 3.1 Guidance in implementing CoPs

The effective implementation of CoPs relies on different success factors and elements that teachers and CoP facilitators need to take into consideration during the four stages of implementation of CoPs, namely **planning, establishing, running** and **sustaining** a CoP. The four stages of CoP implementation are summarised below, alongside practical tips and success factors that teachers can consider when designing and implementing their CoPs. This section exists alongside '**A tool for setting up CoPs**', which aims to support teachers who want to establish a CoP. Throughout this document, the words 'members' and 'teachers' are used interchangeably to indicate the participants in a CoP.

### Plan

1. **What is the purpose** of the CoP?
2. **What** do you hope to achieve through the CoP?
3. **Who** should be involved in the CoP?
4. How will the CoP be **structured**?

### Establish

1. **How often** should a CoP meeting take place?
2. In what **format** will the CoP meetings or activities take place? Face-to-face or virtual?
3. **Where** should the CoP meeting take place?
4. Who should **facilitate** the meeting?

### Run

1. What **activities and practices** should be included in CoP meetings?
2. What **physical and/ or digital resources** can be used in CoP meetings?
3. What **topics** should be discussed in CoP meetings?
4. How should the members **communicate and interact**?

### Sustain

1. How can **communication** between CoP participants be sustained?
2. How can the **impact** of CoPs be sustained in the future?
3. How should members **support each other during and outside CoPs**?
4. How do you **monitor and evaluate** the impact of a CoP?

**Figure 2** The four stages of implementation of a CoP

## 3.1.1 Plan

This stage of community development involves identifying the fundamental features of the community in question, including the **purpose, people and practices**. There are some important things to consider at this stage.

- **Clarifying the purpose of the community is important to its success.**

  A shared vision allows for members to take more ownership over and be more invested in the community, which inspires meaningful engagement, effective contribution and collaboration for the success of the community.

- **Identifying and involving people in your CoP who have shared values and needs, as they are more likely to be motivated and enthusiastic participants.**

  How the group agrees on membership to the CoP and identifies the right participants are important because where community vision does not align or is in contrast with the members' vision or goals, the community is likely to be unsuccessful. For instance, if the content or activity is not relevant or beneficial to the members, then they are less likely to contribute. It is therefore important to consider why members may be invested in this purpose and what they stand to gain, so that the purpose of the CoP is most likely to be meaningful to the members.

- **Teachers may be initially reluctant to join CoPs, so it is important that they understand how they will benefit from their participation in the meetings.**

  As such, it is important to increase awareness of and understanding around the positive impacts and benefits of CoPs.

- **Decisions and activities in the CoP will be most effective if they are member-led and based on teachers' needs.**

  Teacher authority and agency (the ability of teachers to make decisions in the community and school context) is significant to the success of a CoP. Enabling all members of the CoP to be involved in decision making and to influence the activities conducted in the CoP meetings (such as the topics discussed in the meetings) is therefore very important.

- **The extent to which meetings are structured can vary, with some having a more rigid or more fluid structure.**

  There are three types of CoP meetings in terms of their structure and format:

  - **structured CoP meetings** usually have a specific agenda that is set and followed

  - **semi-structured CoP meetings** usually have a general theme that is set, but there is scope for deviation and time for free and open discussion of other topics among the participants

  - **non-structured CoP meetings** usually have no agenda or general theme.

**Based on research, here are some things to consider when deciding on the structure of the meetings.**

## What is the purpose or objective of the CoP?

Is the purpose or the objective of the CoP specific, e.g. writing lesson plans together? You could consider a structured meeting with a clear focus on your objective.

Would you like to primarily collaborate and discuss and share challenges and learnings during your meeting? You could consider a non-structured or a semi-structured meeting that allows you flexibility within the meeting.

Based on research, here are some questions to consider at the planning stage.

## Planning stage

| | |
|---|---|
| **Purpose** | **What will the purpose of the CoP be? Why does it exist?**<br>• *What do members stand to gain from the community? Why should they be involved?*<br>**What is the community aiming to achieve, i.e. what are the goals?**<br>• *How, at what stage and by whom are these goals determined?*<br>• *Will the purpose be consistent or change over time?*<br>**What will success look like and how will this be measured?**<br>• *What will happen when the community achieves its goals?*<br>**How will the community goals be clearly communicated to members?** |
| **People** | **Who will be in this community?**<br>• *Will members be from the same or different schools?*<br>• *Will school leaders be members of the community? In what capacity will they be involved?*<br>• *Where will members come from? Local or global?*<br>**How might someone join the community?**<br>• *Is membership voluntary or mandatory?*<br>• *Is membership invitation only or open to all?*<br>• *How will membership be regulated? Is attendance/participation mandatory?*<br>**What happens if someone is absent from a meeting?**<br>**What are the different roles and responsibilities within the community, i.e. who acts as the facilitator and what is their role?**<br>• *Who will occupy the different roles?*<br>• *Who will act to facilitate meetings (if anyone)? Will this be fixed or rotate around the group?*<br>• *Will the facilitator (or other roles) be internal or external to the group?* |
| **Other stakeholders** | **Who are your stakeholders?**<br>• *Who may the community be accountable to or reliant upon, e.g. for funding?*<br>• *What support will the community need from stakeholders?*<br>• *How can this support be secured?*<br>**In what capacity will stakeholders be involved with the community?** |
| **Structure** | **What is the structure of the CoP, e.g. structured, semi-structured, unstructured?**<br>• *To what extent will meetings be structured?*<br>• *Is there a set agenda for meetings? How is this agenda communicated?* |

**Based on research, here are some tips to get you started:**

- To ensure a shared vision and goals, create a group agreement or 'community mission statement'.
- Evaluate if the CoP is on track to achieve its goals at regular intervals.
- Share research and information (such as this toolkit) around how CoPs may benefit teachers and their students.
- Enable all members of the CoP to be involved in decision making and to influence the activities and the topics during the meetings (such as what is discussed in meetings). For example, this could be achieved through regular feedback or holding a vote.

**Adapt the structure of CoP meetings towards a more semi-structured and flexible format.**

Research recommends having some structure for meetings to be effective. Consider adopting a semi-structured format in the CoP meetings to allow for more flexibility in terms of topics covered. This would allow teachers to discuss any urgent issues they might have to address their and their students' needs.

**Subject-specific sessions in the CoP meetings**

When deciding on the purpose of the CoP, ensure that there is an agreement regarding whether the CoP will be focusing on one subject or not.

If the CoP is not subject-specific, consider hosting some subject-specific sessions in some CoP meetings. This will help teachers further develop their subject-specific pedagogical knowledge and skills through in-depth conversations and interactions with other teachers that teach the same subject.

## 3.1.2 Establish

Once the fundamentals of the community have been determined, such as why the community exists and what it hopes to achieve, it is important to establish the **practicalities of how the community will operate to achieve its goals.** This next stage of community development therefore involves defining the practical arrangements and logistical elements of the community, such as defining the frequency, location, format and mode of delivery of the CoP meetings.

### How often should a CoP meeting take place?

Teacher CoPs are held on a **regular basis, usually once a month.** The frequency of the meetings depends on participants' schedules, availability and needs.

### In what format will the CoP meetings or activities take place? Face-to-face, virtual or blended?

Face-to-face meetings are generally preferred, as they allow for deeper discussions and interactions among teachers. **Face-to-face, virtual or blended (face-to-face and virtual)** CoPs have advantages and disadvantages, which are summarised in Figure 3.

## Virtual

Teachers may lack the technological resources to access virtual CoPs. Consider offering multiple ways to engage with the learning, such as offering printed resources.

Teachers might lack technological knowledge, skills and experience. Consider offering technical support in using digital devices and social media, as well as multiple ways to engage with online learning.

The vast amount of information online can be overwhelming. Consider moderating online activity to ensure that discussions and contributions are relevant and useful.

## Face-to-face

Attendance of face-to-face workshops can present issues due to commuting challenges and the high time commitment required. Ensure that the venue where the CoP meeting takes place is accessible to everyone involved.

## Blended

A blended approach may offer greater flexibility and more options for members to participate in the meeting.

**Figure 3** Modes of delivery of the CoP meetings

### Where could the CoP take place?

When conducting face-to-face CoP meetings, ensure that they take place in a **location that is accessible** and convenient to allow maximum engagement and participation from everyone in the meeting. Additionally, ensure that the venue has the **necessary facilities, resources and infrastructure** to accommodate the needs of the members.

### Who could facilitate the CoP meeting?

Another important aspect of setting up your CoP is deciding who will facilitate or coordinate your meetings. An important aspect of CoPs is that they are member-led, not hierarchies. Any member may facilitate or coordinate meetings, or members may choose to take turns conducting this role. Coordinators need not be experts or trainers; rather, the role of a coordinator is summarised below.

**The role of the coordinator typically includes:**

- encouraging and motivating teachers
- sharing learning materials and resources
- providing help, support and guidance to teachers
- arranging the logistics of the meeting
- providing opportunities for teachers to facilitate the meeting
- creating a safe, but challenging, environment for learning
- being approachable and accessible
- offering ongoing support
- ensuring equal and active participation in meetings
- supporting ongoing interactions between meetings.

The interactions between members and facilitators have a significant impact on the CoP's success and should therefore also be considered carefully.

**Based on research, here are some questions to consider at the establishing stage:**

### Establishing stage

| | |
|---|---|
| **Frequency** | **How frequently will the community meet and/or interact?**<br>**How long is the community intended to be active for?** |
| **Location and platform** | **Where will you meet?**<br>• How will you meet?<br>**Will you meet online, face-to-face or both?**<br>• If online, which platform will you use?<br>• If face-to-face, at what location? |
| **Facilitator** | **How will the premises be organised and by whom?**<br>**Who will facilitate the meetings?**<br>• Is there an allocated facilitator or will different teachers facilitate the meetings (or different parts of the meetings)? |

**Based on research, here are some tips to consider:**

**Tips for the format of meetings**

- Hold meetings frequently to maintain teachers' interactions and communication between meetings and to ensure that the impact of teachers' participation in CoPs is sustained.
- Choose a format (or location for face-to-face meetings) that is convenient and accessible for members.
- Make the necessary logistical arrangements ahead of time so that everyone can access the venue, platform and resources of the meeting.
- Ensure that the venue of a face-to-face CoP meeting has the necessary facilities, resources and infrastructure, e.g. any necessary devices.

### 3.1.3 Run

With fundamental principles in place, the following stage involves considering the day-to-day activities of the CoP, such as what will be discussed and what activities will be carried out.

## What activities and practices could be included in CoP meetings?

Selecting appropriate activities is an important factor to maximise the impact of CoP involvement. Structure and organisation are similarly important to ensure smooth and continuous delivery. There are various activities that can be conducted in a CoP meeting, including:

- warm-up/icebreaker activities at the start of the meeting

- role plays

- group and pair activities and discussions

- activities that focus on authentic and practical scenarios that teachers encounter in their classrooms

- reading articles and documents about specific teaching, learning and assessment practices

- watching classroom videos around specific teaching practices implemented by other teachers.

**Research suggests to be most effective, CoP activities could involve the following:**

- an intense focus on student learning and achievement
- collaborative activities and collective practice, where teachers share their beliefs, views and perceptions around teaching practices with other teachers
- activities that are contextualised to the local social and cultural context and that are relevant to teachers' needs as well as to the needs of their students
- regular action planning and reflection activities
- activities that provide practical guidance and examples to teachers on how they can implement different teaching practices in their classroom
- activities that include authentic classroom situations and scenarios.

## What physical and/or digital resources can be used in CoP meetings?

In terms of resources, it is important that teachers and CoP coordinators use a wide range of physical, but also digital and online, resources during the meetings.

**Physical resources** and tools may include:

- charts

- a white- or blackboard

- printed articles

- books

- a handbook that provides ideas and inspiration for the structure, topics and activities that can be conducted and discussed during the CoP meeting. A CoP handbook can be developed by its members, including the teachers and the CoP facilitator, in order to align with the purpose and vision of the community and the needs of its

members.

**Digital and online resources** may include:

- mobile phones to access specific websites, links and resources online

- projecting devices and screens or smart TVs to watch classroom videos and PowerPoint presentations

- social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, to communicate during and outside the CoP meetings.

## What topics should be discussed in CoP meetings?

Teachers' CoPs typically cover similar topics, including:

- self-reflection

- lesson planning

- activity-based learning

- student-centred approaches

- teaching methods to maximise students' engagement and participation in the lessons

- learning to collaborate with others

- inclusive education pedagogies

- students' social and emotional learning and well-being

- how teachers can use technology in the classroom to maximise students' engagement in the classroom and make the lessons more interactive.

## How best could the members communicate and interact?

- **Be aware of relationships between group members that can have an impact on how effective your CoP is.**

For example, with a group of teachers with similar levels of experience, teachers might be concerned about sharing their weaknesses. Additionally, sometimes more experienced teachers might feel as

if they are not really learning anything new from the group. Communities with negative internal dynamics such as these have less focused or productive sessions.

For **positive relationships** between members, it is therefore important to ensure that everyone:

- participates, interacts, engages and shares learning and experiences

- actively listens to each other's ideas and respects each other's views

- feels supported and free to express themselves without fear of being judged.

It is typically the responsibility of the facilitator to manage interactions between members to ensure a positive dynamic. Guidelines need to be in place to support appropriate interactions and behaviour, and disagreement could be presented as a learning opportunity (not to be avoided), to be approached respectfully and objectively. An example of some guidelines is presented in Figure 4.

**Example community guidelines**

1. Attend meetings regularly.
2. Participate in all activities and contribute to the group as much as possible.
3. Participate, interact, engage and share your learning and experiences.
4. Actively listen to each other's ideas and respect each other's views.
5. Everyone needs to feel supported and free to express themselves without fear of being judged.

**Figure 4** Example guidelines

Teachers may be hesitant to contribute to the meetings for a variety of reasons – fear of judgement, not understanding how to contribute or a lack of motivation (either because they do not feel

that the CoP is beneficial to them or because their contributions are not recognised). For this reason, the role of the **CoP coordinator is essential in encouraging contributions** from all members and **communicating clear expectations about participation**, as well as **motivating members** by praising the efforts of the CoP. A supportive community culture will likewise mitigate reluctance to share.

More specifically, some of the **key qualities of a CoP coordinator** include:

- the ability to build rapport, confidence and motivation of teachers
- ensuring equal and active participation of teachers in the CoP meetings
- being approachable and accessible
- creating a positive learning environment and encouraging all teachers to participate.

**Based on research, here are some questions to consider at the running stage:**

| Running stage | |
|---|---|
| **Topics** | **What topic(s) is going to be focused on?** |
| | • *How and at what point will this be decided?* |
| | • *Will the focus be continuous or change throughout the CoP lifecycle?* |
| | **Why should members consider this topic?** |
| | • *What do members have to gain from their involvement?* |
| | • *How will members be motivated to contribute?* |
| | • *How does their involvement in the community relate to their professional identity?* |
| | **Why might this be important to the school context?** |
| | • *To what extent do the priorities of the school align with the priorities of the community? Will this present a barrier?* |
| | • *What does the school context gain from this community?* |
| **Activities** | **What will the community be doing?** |
| | • *What activities will the community be conducting?* |
| | • *What information/resources will be shared?* |
| | • *Will the activity vary or stay the same through the community lifecycle?* |
| | • *How will this activity be organised, and by whom?* |
| | **How will members be expected to participate?** |
| | • *Will there be guidance on and expectations around participation?* |
| **Communication and interaction** | **How and where knowledge and information are shared.** |
| | • *Which platforms will be used? How can you ensure that members have access to these platforms?* |
| | **How will communication take place – by email, by newsletter, by blog?** |
| | • *What language will be used in communications/meetings?* |
| | • *How frequent will these communications be?* |
| | **How members need to conduct themselves within the community – will there be formal guidance created, and how will it be enforced?** |
| | **How will you utilise technology?** |
| | • *Do members have adequate access to/understanding of technology to utilise it?* |

**Based on research, here are some tips to consider:**

**Topics covered during the meeting**

- Ensure that the topics and themes covered and discussed during the CoP meetings are relevant to teachers' and students' needs, as well as their local context. Ideally, you could agree topics and themes in collaboration with other members of the group.

**Digital and online resources and tools**

- Research indicates that teachers usually find the use of technology during the meetings helpful in making the meetings more interesting, interactive and engaging.

**Supporting positive relationships**

- Implement community guidelines that support positive interactions.
- A moderator may be useful to monitor interactions in online forums.

## 3.1.4 Sustain

This stage of community development is concerned with ensuring that community activity is purposeful and impactful throughout its lifespan. This stage is therefore concerned with ensuring that activity is meaningful and that the impact of the CoP meetings is sustained over time.

### How can communication between CoP members be sustained? How could members support each other during and outside CoPs?

To ensure members/participants have a continuing interest and commitment to the CoP, several actions are suggested. More specifically, the sustainability of the impact of CoPs can be achieved through the following actions:

- **Share meeting summary or highlights**

  **Sharing what happened in the meetings regularly will help** teachers who attended the meeting and those who were absent to stay updated about the CoP activities. Teachers can also refer to notes when they want to implement different activities and teaching practices discussed in the meetings. It is recommended such records of meetings are maintained collaboratively by the whole group and/or by taking turns.

- **Use technology to stay in touch during and outside the meetings**

  This can support the exchange and discussion of ideas, as well as help teachers better understand different pedagogical concepts. For instance, teachers have been known to use social media to share articles or research, practical ideas for implementing what they have learned or even videos of their classroom practice.

- **Conduct regular meetings for teachers in the school who are not part of CoPs**

  **If only some teachers from a school are attending CoP meetings**, **it is recommended to have regular meetings** so that teachers who are part of CoPs can share their learning from CoPs around different teaching practices and activities with other teachers who are not part of CoPs.

- **Introduce peer lesson observations as an opportunity for teachers to interact with each other outside the CoPs.**

  Community members can observe each other's lessons and classroom practices as an opportunity for peer-supported development. For instance, they can provide constructive

feedback to each other on how they can improve their teaching methods and at the same time get inspiration for different pedagogical approaches that they can use with their students in the classroom.

## How can you ensure that meetings continue to be relevant and beneficial to the members' needs?

- **Obtain regular feedback on meetings**
  **Keeping track of how members feel about**

**the activities during meetings will help keep meetings relevant and useful to its members.** This can be done through a feedback form or by scheduling specific times for feedback-focused discussions during the meetings. This process will contribute to ensuring that CoP meetings meet everyone's expectations and help improve the quality of these meetings.

| Based on research, here are some questions to consider at the sustaining stage: |
|---|

| **Sustaining stage** | |
|---|---|
| **Sustain communication and interaction between members during the meetings** | **How can the communication between members of the CoP be sustained during the meetings?**<br>• *How often should the topics discussed in CoPs be refreshed and replaced to maintain communication and interaction between the members?*<br>• *How often should the activities discussed in the CoPs be refreshed and replaced to maintain communication and interaction between the members?*<br>**What should the role of the CoP facilitator be in ensuring that members' communication and interaction are maintained during the meetings?** |
| **Sustain communication and interaction between members outside the meetings** | **How can the communication between members of the CoP be sustained outside the meetings?**<br>• *How can you use social media platforms (such as WhatsApp groups) to maintain communication between members outside the meeting?*<br>• *How often should members communicate outside the meetings?* |
| **Monitor and evaluate the impact of the CoP** | **How can the impact of CoPs be monitored and evaluated?**<br>• *What processes should be in place to monitor and evaluate the impact of CoPs?*<br>• *What data should be collected in order to monitor and evaluate the impact of CoPs?*<br>• *How often should the impact of CoPs be monitored and evaluated?*<br>**What type(s) of support do you need to sustain the impact of CoPs in the future?** |

**Based on research, here are some tips to consider:**

**Tips to sustain CoPs**
- Consider what support would be beneficial in the wider community and how this support might be obtained.
- Promote awareness and understanding of CoPs to increase buy-in and support. For example, communicate your purpose and vision with head teachers, parents, students and other teachers who are not part of CoPs to ensure they support you.
- Allow more teachers to become CoP coordinators or facilitate sections or parts of the meetings. This will enhance teachers' engagement in the meetings and contribute to their professional development.
- Encourage further interaction and participation in CoP meetings through including more pair and group activities and open discussions.
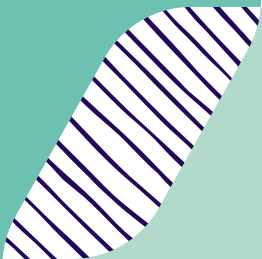
# 4. Activities and tools for effective CoPs

**Table 2** Suggested activities and tools to use in CoPs

| Stage of CoP implementation | Activity | Type of activities (See section 4.1) | Quick reference icon |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Plan Establish Sustain** | **Warm-up/ icebreakers** <br><br>**Self-assessment and action planning tools** | 4.1.1 Self-reflection <br><br>Tools for self-reflection (in classrooms and in network meetings) | |
| **Plan Establish Run** | **Learning by watching** | 4.1.2 Observation <br><br>Tools for peer observation (in classrooms) <br><br>Tools for teacher-supervisors/mentors to observe behaviours (during network meeting and in classrooms) – these would allow supervisors to check how teachers are performing. | |
| **Run Sustain** | **Pair/group discussions** | 4.1.3 Interaction <br><br>Tools to support production and sharing of improvement-focused feedback and support to teachers: <br><br>a.  tools that support teachers with enhancing content of feedback <br><br>b.  tools that support teachers with enhancing the link between feedback, data and action <br><br>c.  tools that support teachers with action planning and follow-up. | |
| **Run Sustain** | **Teacher workshops/ symposiums** <br><br>**Mentoring** | 4.1.4 Professional development and mastery <br><br>These tools facilitate professional development and support teachers' professional and career goals. | |
| **Run Sustain** | **Social media platforms** | 4.1.5 Technology <br><br>Technological tools to support CoP activities: <br><br>a.  tools to support the creation of scalable, low-touch routines for data collection and sharing <br><br>b.  tools that outline the use of nudges to help teachers, peers and supervisors enter the CoP. | |

# 4.1 Tools to support teacher-to-teacher relationships within CoPs

### 4.1.1 Self-reflection

**Warm-up/icebreakers**

A way of commencing the session, teachers introduce themselves by stating their name, school and the classes they teach. There is usually a short, simple activity conducted alongside this to facilitate the establishment of connections between individuals.

Some examples of warm-up/icebreaker activities include:

- Throw the ball – in this activity, teachers can use an adjective starting with the first letter of their name to introduce either themselves or another person

- Onion ring – here, teachers provide an overview of what they have applied in their classrooms since the last meeting.

As teachers from different areas and different schools may be present at the meetings, an effective icebreaker activity will relax the participants and create a sense of camaraderie and cohesion. These initial activities promote an environment that encourages teachers to open up to one another. This links to 'A tool for setting up CoPs', as effective pair/group discussions are more likely to take place when participants feel relaxed and connected with each other. Through warm-up/icebreaker activities, teachers not only get to know one another and form connections but they also increase their confidence in speaking in front of peers.

**Self-assessment and action planning tools**

**Self-reflection** is an essential skill for many professionals, and when conducted effectively it can have huge, long-lasting impact on future work. Self-assessment and subsequent action planning are key components to this process, and while there are different formats that they can take, there are some essential components that could be incorporated.

Self-reflection questions and prompts should focus on the following:

- What did you find enjoyable about the discussion/meeting/activities?

- What went well or what was particularly effective, and why?

- How can the activities discussed in the meeting be incorporated into your own circumstances?

- Is there anything you would change about the activities in order to use them in your own teaching?

Action plans are then formed on the basis of the self-assessment questions. Individual attendees complete their self-reflection questions and then formulate an action plan.

**Action plans** can take many forms, but crucial elements include a **planning** component and a review component. The **planning** component sets out what task(s) will be done and the date on which it will be completed. The **review** component includes questions such as:

- What worked well?

- What worked less well? Why?

- Were there any challenges/difficulties?

- How did you overcome these?

- What will you do differently next time?

- Are there any resources/ideas (lesson plans, worksheets, pictures, etc.) that you can share with others at the next meeting?

The self-reflection questions are most effective when completed by the individual attendees, ideally at the very end of a session. It is vital that the activities are conducted and the action plan is completed **prior to** the next CoP session, as this then informs some of the discussion points that occur between attendees.

It is recommended that the coordinator also engages in self-reflection and action plan processes for the CoP meetings themselves. This can enable the coordinator to review the meeting and consider the aspects that went well and any that may need adapting to make them more effective for the next meeting.

### 4.1.2 Observation

**Learning by watching: Using audio-visual content**

Watching videos of teachers demonstrating techniques and activities in a real classroom context is a very effective way of learning. Learning by watching brings discussions to life and allows participants to 'see' how they would be able to incorporate these into their professional teaching practices.

Some examples of audio-visual content are:

- short video clips of teachers implementing a particular technique

- inviting a guest speaker to demonstrate a technique, using the attendees themselves as participants

- videos of fellow attendees making use of techniques in their own classroom(s).

**Some example videos can be found here:**

a. Teacher pages – Social learning platform for school teachers

b. BLISS teacher development films | British Council

c. ELIPS teacher development films | British Council

In order to be effective, the videos and/or demonstrations must be relatable for the participants and give a realistic impression. This will enable attendees to visualise themselves using the techniques in their own classrooms, which will increase the likelihood of them trying these things out practically.

### 4.1.3 Interaction

**Pair/group discussions**

Enabling teachers to interact and provide constructive feedback to each other on their experiences in a less formal, relaxed setting not only allows for a connection to form between professionals that is based on trust but also creates the opportunity for teachers to share best practice and give advice to each other based on their own teaching experience.

As Wenger et al. (2002) acknowledge, 'knowledge is important to share', but they also go beyond this in specifying that a successful community is one that 'becomes a "place" where people have the freedom to ask for candid advice, share their opinions, and try their half-baked ideas without repercussion'.

**Some example topics of discussion include:**

- activities that teachers have used in the classroom

- what worked well and why

- what worked less well and why

- topics around subject-specific issues.

It is important to stress that research has found the most effective discussions are those where the content is determined by the attendees of the meeting. Pre-planning and itemising discussion topics can constrain members and result in certain crucial elements being missed. An effective discussion activity is one that is given the time and space to develop organically, where the focus, pace and direction are determined by the participants themselves. Consider developing a form where members of the CoP can record their feedback regarding the topics and activities discussed in the meeting. This can inform the content and activities of future meetings, ensuring content covered remains relevant and fresh.

### 4.1.4 Professional development and mastery

**Teacher workshops/symposia**

Effective workshops have a focus that is relevant to the attendees, usually works through a problem or struggle they are having and provides them with the opportunity to explore potential solutions. The aim of the workshop could be to provide attendees with skills and resources to implement in their own teaching in order to overcome the issues or problems they were facing.

Having occasional expert-led workshops and sessions can provide an environment where participants can discuss issues or problems they are facing with an expert and can experiment with methods to tackle these, through shared input and suggestions from others and the expert. Expert-led workshops can provide in-depth insights into specific issues that teachers discuss during the CoP meetings and allow discussions and interactions between CoP members. Issues and problems could be shared with the coordinator in advance, and the coordinator could then invite input/suggestions from participants prior to the workshop itself. This allows participants valuable 'thinking time', resulting in a more focused and productive workshop, where all the time can be devoted to discussing solutions to the issues/problems raised.

**Examples of workshops include:**

- English improvement workshops, involving teachers wishing to improve their English pronunciation and spelling

- incorporating information technology into lessons

- management techniques

- integrating aspects of emotional and mental health well-being into classroom lessons.

Additionally, teacher symposia can also contribute towards teachers' professional development. More specifically, the creation of support networks and professional development events such as symposia that take place at a regional and district level can allow teachers from different CoPs to interact and share learning and experiences, as well as further develop their knowledge and skills. As a result, symposium events can enhance peer interactions and learning.

**Mentoring**

Mentoring can be defined as 'the act or process of helping and giving advice to a younger or less experienced person, especially in a job or at school' (Cambridge University Press and Assessment, 2023). The two (or more) important characters in a mentoring partnership are the mentor and the mentee. More specifically, mentoring within a community of practice usually involves volunteer teachers who are members of the community and have experience and expertise in a specific topic and can provide mentoring support to other members of the same community. Mentoring within a CoP is a form of peer learning and peer support. In addition, mentoring within a CoP can happen through a face-to-face or an online mode, it can be a one-to-one mentoring session or a group mentoring session, and it can happen either in the venue where the CoP meetings take place or in another setting.

The purpose of mentoring is for a more experienced individual to impart knowledge or expertise to a more inexperienced person to improve their understanding and/or confidence in a situation.

For a mentoring partnership to be successful, certain factors must be considered:

- common interests between the mentor and mentee

- a natural connection between the mentor and mentee, stemming from either their common interests or professional specialisms

- the mentor having extensive knowledge and/or experience of the aspect that is the reason for mentoring

- a relationship between the mentor and the mentee that is built on openness and honesty, where both parties listen to each other's views

- meetings conducted in a relaxed and comfortable setting

- communication between the mentor and mentee occurring as regularly as necessary.

As with CoPs in general, the format that mentoring takes will vary depending on the individuals that are taking part. Some mentor–mentee relationships will form quickly and have immediate impact; others take time to evolve and find a rhythm. 'Regular' meetings for one mentor pairing might be different from another, where one pairing may meet weekly and another may meet only once a month. These components are dependent on what works best for the individuals involved, as well as the subject that is the focus of the partnership.

### 4.1.5 Technology

**Social media platforms**

Issues, worries or concerns raised at meetings can sometimes be challenging to openly discuss or adequately solve at the meeting itself. For this reason, it is important to establish a platform that would enable continuity in communication after the CoP meetings and allow all members to have quick access to.

Some practical tips for establishing a group for the members of the CoP include:

- agreeing on a social media platform that it is convenient for all members

- agreeing on who is going to establish and set up the social media group (this can be the CoP coordinator)

- the member responsible for setting up the social media group (this can be the CoP coordinator) inviting all members of the CoP to join the social media group

- members of the group joining the social media group

- members of the group sharing issues or concerns regarding specific issues that they want advice on

- members of the group sharing resources and materials regarding specific topics that might be relevant to other members' work and interests to further develop their knowledge and skills and address specific issues raised during the CoP meetings.

Forming a group on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, email groups and online forums can have many advantages.

- Topics of discussion raised at meetings can continue unconstrained by time limits.

- Information can be shared with attendees and absentees quickly and easily.

- Video clips (see Learning by watching, section 4.1.2) can be shared.

- Individual connections made by attendees can be grown outside the meetings.

- The momentum of topics raised at meetings can be maintained.

- Thoughts or comments can be shared instantly, without having to wait for the next meeting.

In addition to the above points, utilising social media platforms not only allows attendees to interact with each other but also provides the coordinator with an opportunity to form individual/small-scale conversations with attendees. The coordinator may have extra resources that can be tailored to an individual, for which the meeting is not an appropriate time to share them. This one-to-one support can be more easily provided through social media.

# 5. A tool for setting up CoPs

## What is this tool?

The tool presents a series of questions for teachers to ask themselves when developing their CoP. The questions are organised thematically around different elements that need to be considered and addressed when developing a CoP. By answering the questions, the tool will support and work through setting the aims and objectives and design for CoP development and delivery. Teachers can use the table to write down information on the key elements that they need to consider in order to have their 'plan' for the CoP.

### When to use this tool?

Teachers can use this tool when they:

- are planning to establish a CoP

- want to identify the priorities when developing a CoP

- want to identify how they will achieve the objectives of a CoP

- want to identify the resources and support they need to establish a CoP.

**Key considerations before and while using this tool are to ensure that:**

- **you have identified the purpose of the development of the CoP**

- **you have developed specific guidelines for membership and people joining the CoP**

- **the frequency, duration and location of the CoP meetings are mutually agreed with all members of the CoP**

- **all teachers have access to the location where the meeting takes place**

- **you have established ground rules for discussion in order to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality**

- **all teachers participating in the CoP have access to the physical and online tools, resources and platforms used during the meeting**

- **you have an allocated CoP facilitator(s) that will moderate the CoP meetings.**

| A) Planning | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Stage of CoP implementation** | | **Main questions** | **Notes** |
| **Plan** | **Goal** | What will the purpose of the CoP be? Why does it exist? <br>• *What do members stand to gain from the community?* <br>*Why should they be involved?* | Purpose: |
| | | What is the community aiming to achieve, i.e. what are the goals? <br>• *How, at what stage and by whom are these goals determined?* <br>• *Will the purpose be consistent or change over time?* | Goal: |
| | | What will success look like and how will this be measured? <br>• *What will happen when the community achieves its goals?* | Success and monitoring: |
| | | How will the community goals be clearly communicated to members? | Communication: |
| | **People** | Who will be in this community? <br>• *Will members be from the same or different schools?* <br>• *Will school leaders be members of the community? In what capacity will they be involved?* <br>• *Where will members come from? Local or global?* | Membership/joining: |
| | | How might someone join the community? <br>• *Is membership voluntary or mandatory?* <br>• *Is membership invitation only or open to all?* <br>• *How will membership be regulated? Is attendance/participation mandatory?* | |
| | | What happens if someone is absent from a meeting? | Recording absence from meetings: |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | What are the different roles and responsibilities within the community, i.e. who acts as the facilitator and what is their role?<br>• *Who will occupy the different roles?*<br>• *Who will act to facilitate meetings (if anyone)? Will this be fixed or rotate around the group?*<br>• *Will the facilitator (or other roles) be internal or external to the group?* | Roles and responsibilities: |
| **Other stakeholders** | Who are your stakeholders?<br>• *Who may the community be accountable to or reliant upon, e.g. for funding?*<br>• *What support will the community need from stakeholders?*<br>• *How can this support be secured?* | Other stakeholders involved (i.e. school leaders, head teachers, government stakeholders, etc.): |
| | In what capacity will stakeholders be involved with the community? | Role of other stakeholders involved: |
| **Structure** | What is the structure of the CoP, e.g. structured, semi-structured, unstructured?<br>• *To what extent will meetings be structured?*<br>• *Is there a set agenda for meetings? How is this agenda communicated?* | Structure of the meeting: |

| B) Establishing | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Stage of CoP implementation** | | **Main questions** | **Notes** |
| **Establish** | **Frequency** | How frequently will the community meet and/or interact? | Frequency: |
| | | How long is the community intended to be active for? | Duration: |
| | **Location and platform** | Where will you meet?<br>• *How will you meet?* | Location: |
| | | Will you meet online, face-to-face or both?<br>• *If online, which platform will you use?*<br>• *If face-to-face, at what location?* | Mode (online, face-to-face or blended): |
| | | How will the premises be organised and by whom? | Facilities and infrastructure: |
| | **Facilitator** | Who will facilitate the meetings?<br>• *Is there an allocated facilitator or different teachers facilitate the meetings (or different parts of the meetings)?* | Facilitator(s): |

| C) Running | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Stage of CoP implementation** | | **Main questions** | **Notes** |
| **Run** | **Topics** | What topic(s) is going to be focused on?<br>• *How and at what point will this be decided?*<br>• *Will the focus be continuous or change throughout the CoP lifecycle?* | Topic(s): |
| | | Why should members consider this topic?<br>• *What do members have to gain from their involvement?*<br>• *How will members be motivated to contribute?*<br>• *How does their involvement in the community relate to their professional identity?* | Importance of the topic(s) to teachers: |
| | | Why might this be important to the school context?<br>• *To what extent do the priorities of the school align with the priorities of the community? Will this present a barrier?*<br>• *What does the school context gain from this community?* | Importance of the topic(s) to school context and wider community: |
| | **Activities** | What will the community be doing?<br>• *What activities will the community be conducting?*<br>• *What information/resources will be shared?*<br>• *Will the activity vary or stay the same through the community lifecycle?*<br>• *How will this activity be organised and by whom?* | Activities: |
| | | How will members be expected to participate?<br>• *Will there be guidance and expectations around participation?* | Participation: |
| | | What happens if someone is absent from a meeting? | Recording absence from meetings: |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Communication and interaction** | How and where will knowledge and information be shared?<br>• *Which platforms will be used? How can you ensure that members have access to these platforms?* | Communication platforms: |
| | How will communication take place – by email, by newsletter, by blog?<br>• *What language will be used in communications/meetings?*<br>• *How frequent will these communications be?* | Language of communications:<br><br>Frequency of communications: |
| | How members conduct themselves within the community – will there be formal guidance created and how will it be enforced? | Rules on members' behaviour: |
| | How will you utilise technology?<br>• *Do members have adequate access to/understanding of technology to utilise it?* | Use of technology (including online tools and social media platforms): |

| D) Sustaining | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Stage of CoP implementation** | | **Main questions** | **Notes** |
| **Sustain** | **Sustain communication and interaction between members during the meetings** | How can communication between the members of the CoP be sustained during the meetings?<br>• *How often will the topics discussed in CoPs need to be refreshed and replaced to maintain communication and interaction between the members?*<br>• *How often could the activities discussed in the CoPs be refreshed and replaced to maintain communication and interaction between the members?* | Frequency of topics discussed:<br><br>Frequency of activities: |
| | | What should the role of the CoP facilitator be in ensuring that members' communication and interaction are maintained during the meetings? | The role of facilitator in ensuring teachers' communication and interactions: |
| | **Sustain communication and interaction between members outside the meetings** | How can communication between the members of the CoP be sustained outside the meetings?<br>• *How can you use social media platforms (such as WhatsApp groups) to maintain communication between members outside the meeting?*<br>• *How often should members communicate outside the meetings?* | Communications and interactions outside the meeting: |
| | **Monitor and evaluate the impact of the CoP** | How can the impact of CoPs be monitored and evaluated?<br>• *What processes should be in place to monitor and evaluate the impact of CoPs?*<br>• *What data should be collected in order to monitor and evaluate the impact of CoPs?*<br>• *How often should the impact of CoPs be monitored and evaluated?* | Monitoring and evaluation of the impact of CoPs: |
| | | What type(s) of support do you need to sustain the impact of CoPs in the future? | Types of support to sustain the impact of CoPs: |

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