

Fostering collaborative approaches to evaluation: Establishing an APP Evaluation Community of Practice

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What is the Evaluation Community of Practice (ECoP)?

A community for practitioners who are involved in the evaluation of APP intervention strategies and activities.

Purpose:

To establish and maintain a mutually supportive community of practitioners involved in the evaluation of APP interventions strategies and activities, by enabling opportunities for learning and knowledge sharing, opportunities for collaborative work and opportunities for internal and external engagement with other practitioners and external organisation.



To respond to concerns affecting APP evaluators across the sector:

- Resources: often a lack of specialists or specialist knowledge within institutions, institutions need to upskill staff, time constraints, and financial constraints.
- Perceived gap between what is expected by OfS and what can be delivered with current resources / changing guidance, potentially resulting in a lack of shared/common practices and compatibility in findings
- Institutional evaluation culture: importance and prioritisation of evaluation work amongst leadership teams and delivery staff
- Internal procedures, e.g., challenges around seeking ethical approval, data collection, publication
- Student engagement, e.g., low student engagement with evaluation projects, low engagement with surveys
- Challenging Expectations: Emphasis on Type 3 and Type 2 (quant.) evidence, with little understanding of other types of evidence and how they can also enable effective evaluation
- Guidance for Post-Entry/On-Course Activity Evaluation: Less available guidance for post-entry/on-course activity evaluation, with much current evaluation networks focusing on WP activities

Setting up the ECoP

- Task and Finish Group: 18 volunteer members
- 1 scoping meeting + 5 subsequent workshops on themes determined by the group
- Planned and co-facilitated by group members



Community of Practice Design Guide

A Step-by-Step Guide for Designing & Cultivating Communities of Practice in Higher Education

Acknowledgments

This guide was developed based on the shared experiences of several organizations working together in ways that embody the spirit of collaboration. These included the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative at EDUCAUSE (<http://www.educause.edu/nli>) and a community it sponsored, the Bridging VCOP; the American Association for Higher Education (<http://www.aahe.org>); and iCohere (<http://www.coherer.com>). We would also like to specifically acknowledge the NLII VCOP Facilitators Team and four generations of NLII Fellows for their ongoing contribution to and successful demonstration of many of the processes and tools presented in this guide.

How to Use This Community Design Guide

This guide provides a practical approach to creating communities of practice (CoPs) based on experiences working with corporations, nonprofits, associations, government organizations, and educational institutions. While it is important to recognize that every organization and community is different, this guide provides a structure to help clarify the most important design elements that go into defining, designing, launching, and growing CoPs—both online and face-to-face. The first three pages of the guide are designed for those who are considering the strategic use of CoPs to facilitate collaboration, learning, or knowledge generation and want to know more. The subsequent pages of the guide are designed to help CoP designers and facilitators understand the questions, issues, and options involved in planning and cultivating communities.

What Is a Community of Practice?

A community of practice is a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or interest in a topic and who come together to fulfill both individual and group goals.¹ CoPs often focus on sharing best practices and creating new knowledge to advance a domain of professional practice. Interaction on an ongoing basis is an important part of this. A community's specific purpose and goals inform the appropriate activities and technologies that should support it. Many *virtual* communities of practice rely on face-to-face meetings as well as Web-based collaborative environments to communicate, connect, and conduct community activities.

Why Are Communities Important?

Today, organizations, workgroups, teams, and individuals must work together in new ways. Inter-organizational collaboration is increasingly important. Communities of practice provide a new model for connecting people in the spirit of learning, knowledge sharing, and collaboration as well as individual, group, and organizational development.

Communities of practice are important because they:

- ▶ **Connect people** who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact, either as frequently or at all.
- ▶ **Provide a shared context** for people to communicate and share information, stories, and personal experiences in a way that builds understanding and insight.
- ▶ **Enable dialogue** between people who come together to explore new possibilities, solve challenging problems, and create new, mutually beneficial opportunities.
- ▶ **Stimulate learning** by serving as a vehicle for authentic communication, mentoring, coaching, and self-reflection.
- ▶ **Capture and diffuse existing knowledge** to help people improve their practice by providing a forum to identify solutions to common problems and a process to collect and evaluate best practices.
- ▶ **Introduce collaborative processes** to groups and organizations as well as between organizations to encourage the free flow of ideas and exchange of information.
- ▶ **Help people organize** around purposeful actions that deliver tangible results.
- ▶ **Generate new knowledge** to help people transform their practice to accommodate changes in needs and technologies.

How Do You Build CoPs?

Communities of practice are dynamic social structures that require "cultivation" so that they can emerge and grow.² Organizations can sponsor CoPs, and through a series of steps, individuals can design a community environment, foster the formalization of the community, and plan activities to help grow and sustain the community. But ultimately, the members of the community will define and sustain it over time.

Objectives for the ECoP:

Create opportunities to share:

- practices and learn from each other
- evaluation findings
- experiences of conducting evaluation projects
- experiences of engaging with university staff, including delivery staff and senior management staff

As well as to:

- create collaborative evaluation approaches between HEIs
- facilitate feedback processes / peer review
- create opportunities for collaborative publication
- facilitate formal and informal networking
- represent the community in the sector
- influence and challenge sector guidance and practice
- establish links with other organisations and evaluation networks (e.g., TASO, Evaluation Collective, NERUPI, HEAT).



Themed session	Description
Activities	What kinds of activities will generate energy and support the emergence of community presence? What will the community's rhythm be?
Communication and interaction	<p>How will members communicate on an ongoing basis to accomplish the community's primary purpose?</p> <p>What kinds of interactions (with each other and with the content of the community) will generate energy and engagement?</p>
Learning and knowledge sharing	<p>What are the learning goals of the community, and how can collaborative learning be supported?</p> <p>What are the external resources (people, publications, reports, etc.) that will support the community during its initial development? How will members share these resources and gain access to them?</p>
Collaboration	How will community members collaborate with each other to achieve shared goals?
Roles and social structures	How will community roles be defined (individuals, groups, group leaders, community administrators, etc.) and who will take them on?



Principles for the group:

- Collaboration: 'leadership without hierarchy'

*'Non-hierarchical leadership is all about **shared responsibility, collective decision-making, and decentralizing power** across an organization. Unlike traditional leadership styles, where decisions flow from the top down, non-hierarchical leadership **distributes authority among teams, encouraging autonomy and collaboration**. Leaders in these settings act more as facilitators than controllers, guiding their teams toward success without micromanaging or relying on rigid chains of command.'**

- Corporate Rebels, *Leadership in non-hierarchical organizations:a new perspective*, <https://www.corporate-rebels.com/leadership-a-new-perspective>

**added emphasis*

- Safe and supportive space to discuss challenges and ideas openly - 'critical friends'
- Ongoing comms and engagement - interest in initiating debate and discussion
- Tangible benefits: speakers, shared knowledge, resources and expertise
- Formal and informal sessions

What will collaboration look like in the ECOP?

Area: Getting to know each other

Activity	Description	Objectives
Members' Profiles	Members complete a registration form with key questions about their background, work, and interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To understand and share members' backgrounds, interests, and expertise.
Speed Dating Sessions	Brief, informal conversations where members share insights about their work and interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To foster mutual understanding and collaboration.- To identify shared interests and potential partnerships.

What will collaboration look like in the ECOP?

Area: Synchronous activities

Activity	Description	Objectives
Informal Sessions	Bimonthly sessions including activities such as speed dating, sector updates, evidence discussions, lightning talks, action learning sets, and provocations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To maintain a supportive and collaborative environment.- To share knowledge, experiences, and practices.- To learn from each other.
Formal Sessions	Bimonthly webinars focused on presenting evaluation projects, sharing findings, and hosting guest speakers from external organisations and networks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To disseminate evaluation insights.- To engage with and learn from external organisations and networks.

What will collaboration look like in the ECOP?

Area: Asynchronous activities

Activity	Description	Objectives
Teams Site & Channel Discussions	A dedicated Teams space for members to connect and collaborate asynchronously.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To maintain a supportive and collaborative environment.- To share knowledge, experiences, and practices.- To facilitate ongoing engagement.
Collaborative Digital Bookcase	A shared repository for articles, reports, and books related to higher education evaluation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To share and expand the existing evidence base.- To provide accessible resources for members.

What will collaboration look like in the ECOP?

Area: In-depth collaboration

Activity	Description	Objectives
Buddying Scheme	A sustained, mutually supportive relationship between practitioners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To encourage peer learning and support.- To share experiences and practices in depth.

Next steps

- ECOP will launch in October (date TBC), and will be open to FACE APPSIG members.
- First session will be in November 2025.

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