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Establishing and Sustaining a Community of Practice

Communities of practice have taken a firm foothold in the second language teaching profession due to their promise of enabling participants to self determine their professional development needs and, through peer mentoring, achieve their goals. This article provides a rationale as to why the model is particularly well suited to teacher professional development along with guidelines for establishing and sustaining the community. This process is illustrated via several examples: (1) a large-scale, multinational community of practice established in the Lower Mekong region of Southeast Asia and funded by the U.S. Department of State's Office of English Language Programs and (2) two teacher-created local outgrowths of this community established in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Communities of practice enjoy great popularity today in a wide range of fields. However, they have taken a particularly firm foothold in our profession of English language teaching—largely due to their inherent flexibility and their promise of helping participants, through expert-novice interactions, determine and achieve their professional development (PD) goals. This article provides guidelines for establishing and sustaining a community of practice (CoP) with the immediate goal of teacher professionalization. This process is illustrated via several examples: (1) a large-scale, multinational CoP established in the Lower Mekong region of Southeast Asia and (2) two teacher-created local outgrowths of this CoP in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Defining Communities of Practice

What, exactly, constitutes a CoP? Broadly defined, it is a “group 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-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). To better understand the term, let us look at the defining features of a CoP (cf. Haneda, 2006; Tavakoli, 2015; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002a):

1. CoPs are created for participants by participants.
2. They take place outside of an established classroom, with little or no explicit teaching involved.
3. CoP members constitute a defined community; members share a specific domain of knowledge along with common goals and interests.
4. The group's agenda is set by the members themselves and must be agreed upon by all.
5. Members collaborate on tasks, taking on responsibilities as befit their expertise and abilities.

6. Under apprentice-like conditions, less experienced members benefit from guidance provided by more experienced group members.
7. Over time, as less experienced members gain expertise, they take on the role of expert and in turn begin mentoring the group's incoming members.

Membership in a CoP offers distinct advantages over other forms of PD. For one, as noted by Haneda (2006), learners benefit from the group negotiations of meaning that occur as an outgrowth of discussions on achieving the community's goals. A second advantage includes the fact that meetings can convene either face-to-face or online, thus allowing a wider range of membership across regions or even national boundaries. Finally, the CoP's supportive environment encourages members to honestly reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to more readily request and accept assistance from experienced mentees in the group.

A Large-Scale Multinational CoP

The Professional Communication Skills for Leaders (PCSL) project was a 5-year endeavor that took place in the Lower Mekong countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam from 2012-2017. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Office of English Language Programs, the project's overarching goal was to increase mid- to upper-level ministry officials' use of professional English for participation in regional partnerships, meetings, and conferences. English Language (EL) Fellows and Specialists worked in conjunction with teachers and program administrators from the Lower Mekong countries to create the PCSL curriculum and host seminars that developed the presentation, networking, and professional writing skills of participating officials.

Within the first few years of the project, stakeholders concluded that the focus of the project would need to be expanded in order to increase its impact and sustainability beyond its final year. For the reasons outlined above, the CoP model was selected with the EL Fellows and regional co-teachers acting as mentors to a cohort of five to eight local teachers in each of the Lower Mekong countries. During years four and five of the PCSL project, the members of the CoP engaged in a variety of PD activities including: co-teaching seminars with their mentors; completing an action research project; presenting at regional conferences; and organizing presentation skills workshops for local schools and universities. When the project was completed in 2017, CoP members had conducted forty-one independent workshops in the five Lower Mekong countries and had reached an audience of over 1,800 Lower Mekong teachers and students.

Local CoPs in Cambodia

Inspired by their participation in the Lower Mekong Initiative CoP, several Cambodian EL teachers opted to create locally-based CoPs to serve their own teaching communities. As a result of this decision, and with the assistance of locally situated EL Fellows, two Cambodian CoPs were formed—one in Phnom Penh hosted by the Institute of Foreign Languages, Royal University of Phnom Penh and one in Siem Reap.

The Institute of Foreign Languages CoP

In 2016, during the last year of the Lower Mekong Initiative PCSL, several members of the Institute of Foreign Languages in Phnom Penh worked together to form an institutionally-based CoP to serve the local teachers. Founding members of the Institute of Foreign Languages CoP included the Head of the Department of English, a lecturer from the institute, and the local EL Fellow. The aim of this CoP was (1) to support the Institute's lecturers and MA TESOL students who serve as teachers of English at local EL schools and (2) to enable members to share teaching activities and solutions to classroom problems. Initially begun with 5-10 participants attending regularly-scheduled meetings, the Institute of Foreign Languages CoP grew rapidly in membership, eventually reaching its current size of 291 members from various provinces and countries.

Following the departure in 2017 of the U.S. State Department-sponsored EL Fellow, the Institute of Foreign Languages CoP was left in the hands of the locals, who followed the existing structures established in the first year of the venture. After two years of regular monthly meetings and support from school authorities (in particular from the Institute of Foreign Languages Head of Department), the CoP today has a fully-developed, unique vision and a stable structure of core members, coordinators, facilitators, and note-takers. It also has its own planned schedules and activities for each academic year that are agreed upon by the membership at the beginning of each academic year. In Wenger's (1998) terms, the Institute of Foreign

Languages CoP has reached maturity, with its members having a sense of belonging and a willingness to showcase their knowledge to others. Moreover, with this maturity, the CoP has received support from a donor agency—in this case, the U.S. Embassy—to send its members to attend conference events held in four Cambodian provinces, allowing these members to showcase their research and share their teaching experiences with other EL teachers in the provinces.

In addition to the regular Institute of Foreign Languages CoP face-to-face meetings, an e-community has been created using a Facebook group as a communication platform. Currently serving a core and peripheral membership of 1,651 individuals, the main purpose of this platform is to support the group's members in the following ways:

1. Facilitate the sharing of knowledge and information: Since the face-to-face meetings are subject to change according to the availability of the lead facilitators, the Facebook group serves the function of announcing meeting dates, agendas, and member responsibilities. It also allows members to share links to online reading materials, upcoming conferences, and scholarship information.
2. House collections of materials: This includes the PowerPoint slides used in the meetings, recommended readings, meeting notes, and the photos of meeting activities.
3. Showcase members' achievements: These typically describe their successful implementation of classroom activities with their students.
4. Troubleshoot problems: The platform provides a discussion venue for classroom issues posted by the members.

Aside from its e-presence, the Institute of Foreign Languages CoP interacts with other local CoPs that share a similar focus on the PD of English language teachers in Cambodia. Its most direct contact is the Siem Reap CoP (see below), with which it collaborates. This collaboration and sharing of common knowledge helps members of both CoPs strive harder to upgrade their knowledge and to avoid burnout.

The Siem Reap CoP

The 12 founding members of the Siem Reap CoP met initially in 2018 to brainstorm their vision, mission, core values, and common goals. In order to achieve their vision of sustainable programming that promotes the quality of local EL teaching and learning, they arranged monthly meetings and trainings, with members volunteering to take turns hosting and determining training topics beneficial to all members. Table 1 (Heng, 2019) provides the CoP mission statement as formulated by the founding members:

Table 1
Mission Statement of the Siem Reap CoP

Vision: Sustainable programming that promotes the quality of English language teaching and learning in Siem Reap, Cambodia

Mission: To build and develop a network of English teachers in order to share techniques, methods, and ideas through seminars, workshops and exchanges with local, national, and international members

Values: Solidarity, life-long learning, and mutual sharing for professional development

Goal: Create a community of sharing, and learning within the inclusive development; everyone is happy with a sustainable, knowledgeable, and harmonious society

Although at the outset only a few teachers participated, once news of the CoP spread membership began to blossom and a sense of momentum established itself. Soon thereafter, with funding secured from the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh and with the assistance of a local EL Fellow, the CoP reached out to teachers in rural areas outside of Siem Reap City as well as to other provinces. Embracing the notion of “sharing is caring,” the fourteen founding members organized events for the new members to share their common practices and experiences.

Due to the ensuing exponential growth of interest in the CoP, several closed Facebook groups were established to maintain communication among members. Two of these groups serve members in Siem Reap

(one dedicated to collaborating with the Institute of Foreign Languages CoP and one serving public school teachers in the province) while the others serve members in the provinces of Battambang, Kampot, and Kampong Cham. One of the CoP's main events is EdCamp Cambodia, an innovative "unconference" that is designed to create a participant-driven day of PD. Participants register to join the event using Google Forms, sharing topics of potential interest. These are then noted by the EdCamp's volunteer team, who organize the conference schedule accordingly. In lieu of official presenters, the conference consists of facilitators who lead the group discussions in the various breakout sessions. It is the participants who decide what the day will look like. Over the course of the day, they have the opportunity to attend four to five sessions. The rule of the conference is to "vote with your feet." Thus if participants do not find a session useful, they are free to walk out and attend another one.

The first of the EdCamp events was hosted in Siem Reap in 2017. Before the end of 2018, CoP members had set up a second EdCamp in Battambang, soon to be followed by additional EdCamp events in other locations. Participants in these EdCamp events included not only teachers from state schools but also those associated with non-governmental organizations and those working in private language schools. Table 2 (B. Koi, personal communication, June 26, 2020) provides details on the EdCamp events held to date in Cambodia.

Table 2
EdCamp Activities in Cambodia to Date

EdCamp Dates	Location	Total # of Participants
June 11, 2017	Siem Reap	120
November 11, 2018	Battambang	126
January 6, 2019	Kampot	90
March 10, 2019	Kampong Cham	81
June 2, 2019	Siem Reap	127
November 24, 2019	Battambang	125
January 12, 2020	Kampot	75
June 21, 2020	Virtual EdCamp (Siem Reap)	67

Despite the uncontested success of EdCamp, several challenges remain. First, because of limited time available on the part of the organizers and volunteers, certain implementation issues have surfaced regarding its setup and smooth operation. Since the format is a very new thing for Cambodian teachers, there are still many who remain skeptical of the benefits of joining the forum. Some participants attending EdCamp events mistakenly expect to have expert speakers or presenters leading the discussion in the discussion rooms. Additionally, the facilitation skills of the volunteers during the discussion sessions are still very limited. With time and mentoring, it is hoped that these skills will develop. Finally, English teachers in the rural areas of Cambodia have not always been privy to information about the EdCamp dates and locations—nor are they always aware of the benefits these events offer them as EL teachers. It should be noted that one important change to the EdCamp format was made in an effort to adapt it to the local context: It was decided to allow a formal plenary presentation by a knowledgeable expert in the field at each EdCamp event. The purpose behind this decision was to introduce teachers from the provinces, most of whom have little exposure to current teaching trends, to topics of current interest in the field.

Creating and Sustaining a CoP

The above examples of the Lower Mekong Initiative CoP and the two Cambodian CoPs showcase the model being implemented in vastly different settings and under very different logistical circumstances. In the case of the Lower Mekong Initiative CoP, U.S. government resources and expertise figured prominently in its creation as well as in its purpose, direction, leadership, and even its membership. The two Cambodia-based CoPs, on the other hand, were entities created by local initiative and allowed to grow and thrive organically based on interest shown by the resident teaching community. In the following sections, we explore reasons why EL teachers should consider starting their own CoP, how they can go about creating one, and once established, how they can sustain it.

Why Start a CoP

Many teachers believe that the best PD happens through hands-on experience in their own classroom (Tavakoli, 2015); hence they may not always see the relevance of organized PD opportunities. The CoP model embraces teachers' needs and amplifies their personal expertise, allowing members to directly influence the focus and outcomes of the PD experience. This is in stark contrast to more traditional models of PD, which often require teachers to piece together conferences, webinars or online courses, journal articles, and videos that reflect the reality of their own classrooms.

In particular, the collaborative blend of experienced and novice teachers in a CoP is beneficial in fostering a learning community and in helping individual teachers navigate the PD opportunity. Experienced teachers can provide the initial leadership needed to form the CoP, and, as novice teachers gain experience, they can sustain the model in turn by mentoring new teachers who join. These encounters are valuable for experienced and novice teachers alike: Experienced teachers have the opportunity to function as mentors and leaders while novice teachers have someone to turn to as questions arise. Here, one of the members of the Institute of Foreign Languages CoP who was mentored in her action research by a senior colleague articulates the benefit of working with an experienced teacher:

It [CoP] promotes professional growth... The teacher is the researcher. I am the one who knows what is happening in the classroom and should be changed for the better. It [CoP] promotes collaboration because in order to conduct the research, I need to work with my students. More than that, I also work with my mentor for feedback and comments. (M. Kheng, personal communication, February 8, 2019)

A well-designed and implemented CoP breaks down the boundaries between individual and organized group PD, yet it does not require that English language teaching practitioners wholly abandon familiar methods of individual reflection in favor of group learning. Within a CoP, the individual cognitive processes are an essential element of the practice; the social interaction and collaboration derive from co-creating a repertoire of teaching tools that all members of the group can access. These include classroom experiences, resources, stories, and techniques that members bring with them to share with their fellow participants (Patton & Parker, 2017). As well, participation in a CoP provides ongoing and flexible opportunities for growth and development within an intentional teacher community, where the classroom experiences of teachers and teacher educators provide a wealth of material on which to reflect, while also creating a collective energy resulting in sustained learning.

Teaching has traditionally been seen as an isolated practice, with individual teachers leading their own classes, having little time for dialogue about teaching practices (Hadar & Brody, 2010). This can leave teachers feeling isolated and alone—feelings that are not necessarily alleviated by traditional PD opportunities. Perhaps the most obvious benefit of joining a CoP, as noted by a core member of the Institute of Foreign Languages CoP, is the immediate one of socializing and forming bonds with others in the profession: “We can sometimes share other topics besides teaching. And we hang out sometimes...it goes beyond working relationship. We become more and more like friends.”

Ultimately, the CoP model seeks to break down the metaphorical walls between classrooms; teachers come together with their shared interest, and the community is formed through interaction in purposeful discussions around teaching practices and engagement in activities. This flexibility and emphasis on individual experience combined with community learning makes the CoP model an ideal PD choice for EL practitioners from a variety of backgrounds. Creativity can flourish when teachers with vastly different approaches, teaching techniques, and resources have the opportunity to connect with one another.

How to Create a CoP

Due to the highly contextualized and self-directed nature of CoPs, creating and sustaining one should be considered an art and not a science. The following suggested steps or stages of development should thus be viewed as flexible guidelines rather than hard and fast rules.

According to Wenger (1998), CoPs pass through five developmental stages, beginning with the *potential* for community formation (where individuals discover mutual interests and motivations), and progressing next to the launching or *coalescing* stage where the community is formed and members begin to design learning activities. The next phase is that of *maturing*, wherein a clear sense of communal identity emerges, standards are established, and intentional actions are undertaken to close gaps in knowledge. Following this phase is one of *stewardship*. In this phase the community learns to deal with growth and the resulting changes

in membership and leadership; it also expands its domain of influence, sharpens its focus, and addresses the need for new sources of energy and expertise. Finally, in the *transformation* phase members recognize that the community has outlived its useful purpose and move on to other more relevant pursuits. Figure 1 summarizes these five stages. Below we examine each stage in detail.

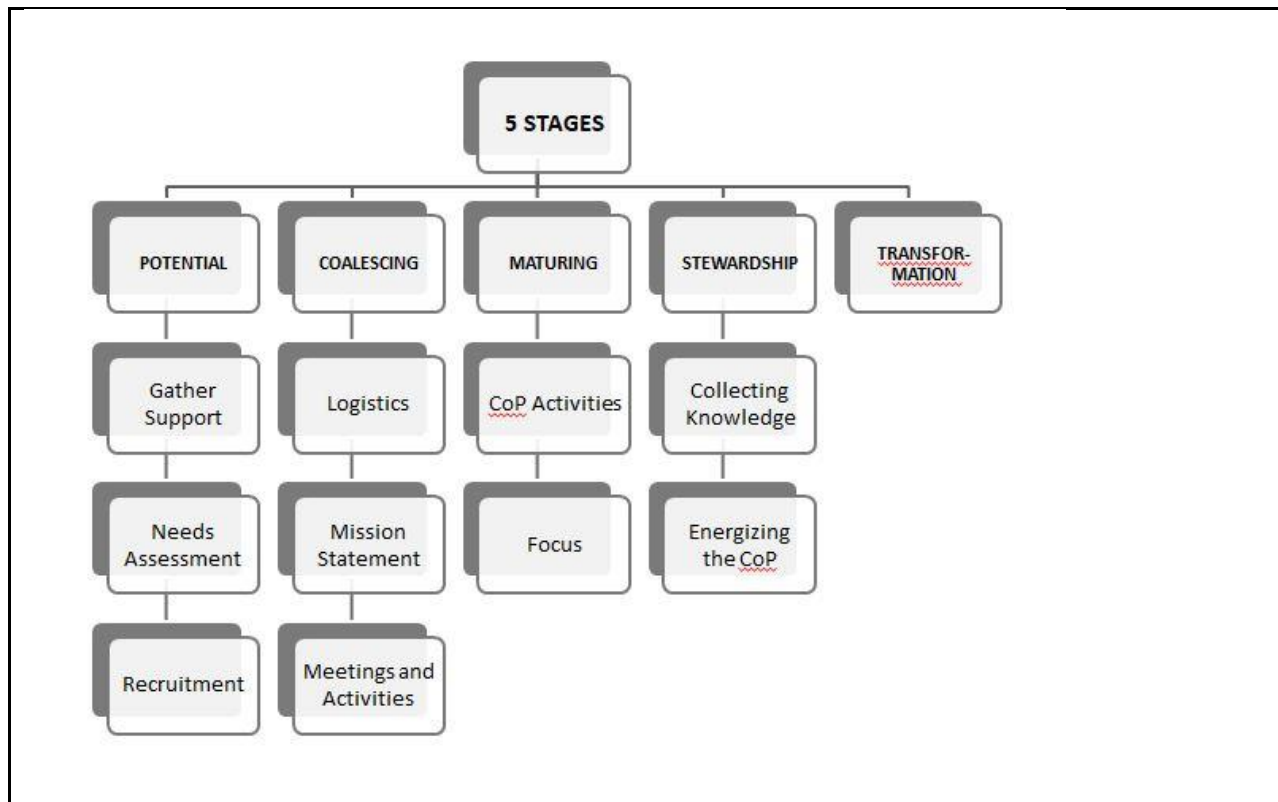


Figure 1. The five developmental stages of a CoP (based on Wenger, 1998).

Potential. An important initial step is to assess interest in creating a CoP and to gather support among teachers wanting to join. When it comes to recruiting members, informal conversations with colleagues or people in your professional network can be a quick and effective way to gauge overall interest and to organize a group of highly motivated core members to continue to gather support. However, in some contexts, it might be appropriate to first seek permission from the principal, dean, or supervising official before forming a CoP, especially if meetings will take place on campus. To encourage “buy-in” from senior leadership, core members should be prepared to define the benefits of a CoP to stakeholders and to explain how a CoP can advance strategic institutional goals.

Based on our experience with the PCSL and Institute of Foreign Languages CoPs, we suggest beginning by interviewing teachers in one’s local network and by asking colleagues to nominate potential members. During the initial interview with prospective CoP members, we explained expectations for participation and outlined the benefits of membership. This helped to engage participants and keep them motivated. We also used the promise of free books to attract and maintain members.

Another essential step in this stage is to develop a needs assessment to gauge members’ professional interests and needs. This assessment can be conducted through surveys, casual discussions with interested colleagues, and/or formal interviews with stakeholders. The needs assessment should include questions that will reveal teachers’ professional interests, current gaps in knowledge, areas of expertise, opinions on instructional policies, preferred leadership structure for the CoP, attitudes toward collaborating with their colleagues, and ability to commit to the CoP. A thorough needs assessment can assist the core members in identifying and prioritizing the community members’ interests and needs; this, in turn, will steer the direction of the CoP.

For the PCSL CoP, we created a needs assessment survey that was completed during our initial orientation meeting. Designed to ascertain members' PD interests, wants, and needs, the survey results were used to organize the CoP workshops. We conducted an additional survey in the second year and, again, organized the workshops based on responses received. As for the Institute of Foreign Languages CoP, we conducted a similar survey, but also had informal discussions with the members about PD topics that they would like to focus on during meetings.

Once a group of core members has been established, the next step in the process is to identify and recruit potential members for the CoP. To attain diverse perspectives and experiences, core members should consider inviting potential CoP members with varying years of experience, divergent opinions, solutions to problems, and creative ideas. It is important to inform potential members that CoP activities will be built around relevant topics and challenges that teachers face in the classroom and that members will be able to directly influence its focus. It should also be emphasized that potential members will have an opportunity to connect with other teachers, gain and/or create useful resources, and share best practices. When selecting and inviting members to join the CoP, core members should consider establishing criteria for potential members and sharing these standards transparently during the selection process. Perhaps the most important criteria concerns future members' degree of commitment to CoP activities (Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium, 2016).

Coalescing. According to Wenger (n.d.), the coalescing stage is when “[m]embers have had their hopes raised by the discovery of the potential of their community and their commitment to get it going, but the value of the community still has to become a reality in their lives” (p. 2). It is in this stage that the organizing forms of the community (such as the CoP mission or vision statement), meeting schedule(s), online presence, and meeting space are established.

A practical and essential step in the advancement of a CoP is securing and creating a collaborative space for members to meet and conduct activities. For virtual CoPs, this will involve core members researching a videoconferencing system (Zoom, Skype, etc.) to facilitate ‘live’ meetings and/or a platform (Blackboard, Canvas, Schoology, Edmodo, etc.) to store CoP information and resources. Needless to say, frequent re-examinations of these platforms and systems should be conducted as new technology can evolve and may be better suited to the needs of the CoP (Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium, 2016).

For face-to-face communities, a physical room or meeting space should be identified and be booked or rented (if needed) for on-going meetings. The CoP meeting space should be a convenient location for members to access, with an on-campus location being ideal. Assuming that a dedicated space is secured for the CoP, members might want to consider investing in, or pursuing funding for, shelving to house resources, office supplies for activities, and/or other decorative items. An inviting and welcoming collaborative space for CoP events can create a productive and focused environment and can incentivize members to attend.

A crucial important document for a CoP to develop is its mission statement, similar to that created by the Siem Reap CoP; this document clearly establishes the community's values, goals, purpose, and operating structure. Collaboratively, members should agree upon the mission and/or purpose of the CoP, addressing the questions of who can join the CoP and what its value is. Members should also brainstorm and include in the mission statement both short and long-term goals that the community will work towards achieving such as increasing CoP membership, fundraising activities, etc. Wenger et al. (2002b) explain that CoPs “evolve beyond any particular design, the purpose of a design is not to impose a structure but to help the community develop” (p. 2). The design and structure of a CoP will ultimately be built into the CoP's mission or vision statement and should clearly detail the leadership structure and operating procedures for CoP events and activities (Gotto et al., 2008).

During initial meetings, an important step will be to establish a reliable means of communication for all members and to assign clear roles and responsibilities (i.e. administrators, facilitators, etc.) to members that have expressed interest and can commit to taking a leadership role in the CoP. These members will become responsible for planning and facilitating CoP meetings and activities during the initial months of the CoP, but can rotate roles or nominate replacements as needed. The frequency and duration of any CoP meetings or activities should be decided as a community and scheduled at convenient dates and times for members. If possible, a CoP calendar for the year (with synchronous and asynchronous events included) should be created and publicized for current and potential members (Cambridge and Suter, 2005). The standardization

of these meetings can instill confidence in the mission of the CoP and clarify the focus of events for both internal and external members of the CoP.

For the PCSL CoP, members were partnered and asked to plan and facilitate a half-day workshop using the PCSL curriculum. After the workshops, a reflection and feedback activity was conducted. During the second part of the day, an additional PD workshop (based on the need assessment) was facilitated by the CoP leaders. For the Institute of Foreign Languages CoP, the lead facilitators assumed responsibility for the first few meetings, after which CoP members were asked to sign up to present/facilitate a meeting for the remainder of the school year.

Maturing. As the CoP begins meeting regularly and establishing routine procedures, it is important for community leaders to observe how members are engaging in the CoP activities and to modify the CoP focus and activities to be responsive to members' needs. For the PCSL CoP, for example, we substituted some PD workshop topics based on feedback from the PCSL CoP members who wanted more topics such as time management as opposed to TESOL-related ones. These changes definitely increased engagement. As Wenger (n.d.) notes:

...[n]ow that the community has coalesced, people know that they do have some useful things to share, that relationships between community members are enduring, and that the community has enough resilience to survive. At this point a community is ready to develop a self-conscious identity as a community.

Successful routines, procedures, and activities should be replicated while any impractical or ineffectual practices should be discarded. To exemplify, in the PCSL CoP workshops coupled with a reflection/feedback component proved to be highly popular. This format thus became a standard format, as members reported enjoying working with each other to plan the workshop and found the reflection/feedback sessions to be helpful and empowering. Similarly, ideas such as sharing stories of community and individual achievements or creating opportunities for members to earn awards or recognition can lead to increased engagement and momentum (Lupton et al., 2017). CoP meetings can also be an opportune time to "facilitate discussions about the community itself, including the community culture, processes and practices, technology, and individual motivations for participating in the community" (Lupton et al., 2017).

In addition to designing responsive CoP activities, another way to create awareness of the CoP's purpose and focus is to consider generating an official name and/or logo (Lupton et al., 2017). Additional benefits of "branding" your CoP can be to legitimize the CoP to the administration, attract new members (by offering membership in a professional organization that can be added to a curriculum vitae or resume), increase the brand recognition of the CoP, and communicate the CoP's mission and purpose to an external audience (Lupton et al., 2017).

To encourage buy-in and sustain the CoP, core or lead members can create opportunities for more novice members to rotate into or assume a greater role in the community. It is the responsibility of CoP leaders to identify emerging roles that CoP members could step up to fill and to ensure that this process is fair and transparent. As well, CoP members can be assigned to special groups to work on projects or activities that support the CoP. This additional commitment from CoP members will hopefully lead to the recognition that it is ultimately the members' responsibility to steward the knowledge that the CoP constructs.

Stewardship. According to Wenger (n.d.):

...[t]aking explicit responsibility for stewarding expertise in its domain means developing its practice to its full potential. To this end, the community has to start thinking strategically about the knowledge it has accumulated and the knowledge it needs to create. It has to maintain energy and explore the leading edge of its practice" (p. 3).

At this point, the CoP should already have systems and processes in place for collecting and storing (either physically or virtually) any materials that members have collected. It is in this stage in the lifecycle that members should look critically and evaluate what gaps (if any) exist and how to ensure that the CoP is cultivating and promoting cutting-edge techniques and activities. The CoP must stay current if it wants to remain relevant to its members and its host organization. This knowledge can also be used by or presented to institutional administrators or contacts so that more informed educational or policy decisions can be made, thus increasing the visibility and legitimacy of the CoP to institutional or organizational leadership.

The CoP may want to employ several strategies to maintain excitement and momentum. Potential approaches include strategically reaching out and cultivating relationships with various people and organizations (including other CoPs) that can serve as sources of expertise as well as inviting "outsiders" to

offer perspectives on how the CoP could improve or leverage existing talent in a new way (Wenger, n.d.). These new connections and perspectives can foster new projects, experiences, and more opportunities for CoP members, which will energize and perhaps lead the CoP in a new direction.

Transformation. To maintain relevance and responsiveness to the CoP's need, the CoP can regularly "take the pulse" of the CoP through surveys or interviews to assess CoP members' expectations and attitudes. The metrics of success will be different for each CoP and as the community evolves and changes, this definition could also potentially change (Lupton et al., 2017). These "check-ins" might lead the CoP down an unexpected path or even split the CoP into two separate groups. It is natural for a CoP to change, expand, split, combine, or even to lose relevance and slowly fade away. The continuation or legacy of the CoP will be determined by the passion of its members and "this makes its will to live an expression of the human spirit and whatever legacy it leaves behind more meaningful" (Wenger, n.d. p. 5).

How to Sustain a CoP

Once established, it falls to the CoP leaders to generate interest in the CoP's mission and to entice new members to join the community. The goal here is to ensure that the CoP grows along with its membership and continues to reflect the needs and interests of its membership. Selected recommendations for helping to sustain a CoP follow.

1. Securing internal and external support. Although it is critical that a CoP start with individual commitment, practical considerations such as securing a place to meet and receiving support from school authorities (e.g., school principals, school management team members, senior teachers/professors) are vital in starting and sustaining a CoP. Where feasible and crucial to the life span of the CoP, securing external sources of support (e.g., from publishing companies, embassies and consulates, professional organizations, non-governmental organizations) to provide additional incentives for members (such as travel grants for conferences) is also desirable.

2. Delineating the roles and responsibilities of members. The roles of CoP coordinators and core members are crucial to its overall success. Leadership needs to maintain the vision and mission of the CoP and keep track of where, how, and what to do in CoP meetings. CoP coordinators or facilitators should help with finding consensus on the dates to meet and the topics to be discussed; they and other core members should also help to facilitate the discussions.

3. Building interpersonal relationships among CoP members. Working together is all about mutual understanding. Once the CoP members begin to feel a sense of belonging and support, they become more receptive to collaborating—not only with other CoP members but as well with other colleagues. They also become more open to constructive feedback from colleagues and look for ways to try new things in their classrooms to better their teaching. As noted by Borg (2012):

...teachers who volunteer to become part of a CoP also have responsibilities within that community. In order to sustain the community, they need to find ways to work together, negotiate professional and personal tensions and differences, value PD opportunities (together and individual differences), embrace greater leadership roles (internally and externally) and openly celebrate success together. (p. 314)

4. Fostering a sense of inclusivity. There are inevitably peripheral members of the CoP who occasionally join CoP meetings (for example, when the topics of the meetings match their own interests) but who do not attend on a regular basis. These may be teachers of English from other English language schools, those teaching young learners, MA in TESOL students, pre-service teachers at a given language institute, or those from other regions, provinces, or outlying areas. In this regard, it is the core members' responsibility to make these peripheral members feel a sense of belonging, thus encouraging them to troubleshoot their professional difficulties together with the CoP's core members.

5. Instilling confidence in more novice members. Participation in a CoP helps its members—especially those who are more novice—to benefit from the PD opportunity of being mentored by more senior faculty members. This may take the form of troubleshooting classroom problems by having discussions either informally or during the face-to-face monthly meetings. Alternatively, those members who are less experienced in conducting research may also be mentored by CoP members with more experience in this domain.

6. Creating an e-community. Creating a CoP e-community (e.g., through CoP Facebook pages) serves several purposes. For one, it provides a convenient venue for reminding members of upcoming physical

or virtual meetings, conferences, funding opportunities, and the like. Moreover, it connects members regardless of their geographical differences. Providing members with access to an easily-accessible online discussion venue creates opportunities for its members (both core and peripheral) to be informed by postings shared by the other community members as well as to disseminate information of interest to the community at large.

EL teaching is a field that prepares future educators, professionals and leaders for the ever-changing demands of the 21st century. It is of little surprise that CoPs—a PD model created by teachers, for teachers, and with the flexibility to evolve and meet ever-changing demands—should hold such appeal in the field of TESOL. The authors hope that the successes of the CoPs described in this article inspire other teachers to explore this model for creating responsive and engaging PD in their teaching communities. It is also hoped that the recommendations for creating and sustaining a CoP will give readers who would like to implement a CoP with their peers and colleagues concrete steps to get started. While there are certainly challenges that accompany the implementation of a less traditional form of PD, the authors firmly believe that they are vastly outweighed by the numerous benefits. As one of the members of the Lower Mekong Initiative CoP recognized, a CoP is simply an extension of the informal conversations that teachers have about how they teach during lunch breaks and recess. In her words: “I think if more people know the benefits of a CoP and this kind of professional development, they would be more creative with the way that they communicate with their peers and their colleagues.”

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