

Central Regional Hub-funded project

Project Report



Establishing Communities of Practice

A pedagogy development mechanism for
teachers in the New Zealand Private
Training Establishment environment

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Whilst there is extensive literature on the use of Communities of Practice (CoP) as a teacher development tool available from Australia and other international publications, there is minimal literature in the New Zealand education context, particularly the vocational education and training sector. This collaborative project involved Youth Guarantee (YG) tutors from three Private Training Establishments (PTE) – Workforce Development Ltd (WDL), The College of Future Learning (FutureCol), and G&H Training Ltd (G&H) – engaging in a CoP over a six-month period. The project sought to determine whether through focused critical thinking opportunities, a CoP supported the tutors' pedagogical practice. A key output of the project is the design of a *CoP Implementation Guideline* which reflects the PTE context and which can be applied across different tertiary education sectors.

Project Aims

The central aim of this project was to determine the effectiveness of a CoP as a mechanism for professional development of YG tutors in the PTE context. This was explored through a group of YG tutors from the three PTEs participating in an initial training workshop and four monthly CoP meetings. These collaborative sessions were used to:

- i) Explore participant tutors' pedagogical practices;
- ii) Share teaching and learning experiences;
- iii) Seek solutions to teaching and learning challenges;
- iv) Identify goals for the tutors' ongoing professional development.

Method

Participative action research methodology guided the design, implementation and evaluation of this project, with the lead researcher acting as a facilitator and coordinator of the emergent CoP. Fifteen tutors were involved in different phases of the project, although the demands of teaching responsibilities, the logistics of location, and the variance in online technology meant that not all were able to attend every meeting. However, all were included in communications and the opportunity to contribute feedback and reflection. In addition to participating in a workshop and four CoP meetings, an expectation of the tutors was their use of time in between the meetings to trial and/or implement strategies which support YG student achievement, and bring those learnings to share with the CoP group. Reflecting the nature of participatory action research, the tutors had multiple opportunities to incorporate new teaching and learning

strategies gleaned from the CoP into their own practice, using the time between the training workshop, the CoP meetings and in-between these meetings, to explore, trial, share and evaluate their experiences and learnings throughout the six-month project period.

Findings

- (i) Commencing the project with a training workshop provided the tutors with an opportunity to explore the concept and practice of CoPs and determine the purpose of their CoP going forward. The workshop enabled the tutors to engage in and benefit from the CoP meetings as there was an established understanding of the CoP purpose and process, and their roles and responsibilities as CoP members;
- (ii) The monthly CoP meetings provided a place and space for the tutors to share their teaching experiences, discuss and seek solutions to teaching and learning challenges, and learn from each other;
- (iii) The CoP prompted the tutors to engage in critical reflection on their practice during the monthly meetings and in between the meetings;
- (iv) All participants felt that they had benefitted significantly from their experience as members of an active and effective CoP and were keen to continue. However, although they agreed that leadership of the CoP should be distributed and members should take turns to assume the coordinator role, this did not occur during the six-month project lifespan. This emphasised the importance of a designated (and in this case, external) facilitator, at least in the early stages of a newly established CoP.
- (v) Based on the tutors' feedback and the CoP activities they engaged in and created during the project, a *CoP Implementation Guideline* was developed (refer Figure 1., Section 4). A *Training Session Plan* and the *Reflective Journal Resource* are contained as appendices.

Given the lack of published studies of any similar use of CoPs in the New Zealand PTE sector, this project extends the scope of the existing knowledge and practice of CoPs as a professional development support mechanism. It is anticipated that the tools developed here will be easily transferable and immediately useful to other providers across the New Zealand tertiary landscape.

1. Introduction

1.1 Project Objectives

This collaborative project involving fifteen Youth Guarantee (YG) tutors from three Private Training Establishments (PTE) – Workforce Development Ltd (WDL), The College of Future Learning (FutureCol), and G&H Training Ltd (G&H) - sought to determine whether a Community of Practice (CoP) is an effective mechanism to support YG tutors' pedagogical practice.

CoPs are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Communities are sometimes formed within the one organisation, and sometimes, as in this case, across many organisations (Young & Mitchell, 2008). According to the literature, the benefits of CoPs for individual practitioners include:

1. Enabling employees to manage change;
2. Providing the practitioner with access to new knowledge;
3. Fostering trust and a sense of common purpose in the individual;
4. Adding overall value to professional lives (Young & Mitchell, 2002).

Putz and Arnold (2001) support the idea that a CoP is a “*group of people, small enough for its members to be acquainted, although they are frequently dispersed over geographical distances*” (p. 184), as was the case with the three participating PTEs in the current study. Using an online platform to enable four of the tutors to participate in the CoP was therefore an important aspect of the project. The key objectives of the project were:

1. To investigate the effectiveness and usefulness of a CoP as a YG tutor professional development mechanism;
2. To investigate how a CoP can provide a space for tutors to develop their signature pedagogy;
3. To develop a *CoP Implementation Guideline* that reflects the unique practices of YG tutors in the PTE context and can be integrated within an organisation's professional development infrastructure.

Engaging the tutors in collecting evidence of their practice, evaluating this evidence, and applying the findings from these activities to their future practice was a central component of their participation in, and learning from, the project. It was also anticipated that the learning

gained would lift internal capability and bring a focus to further internal professional development, through building organisational systems and expertise and developing mechanisms/channels for staff to share their learning.

Beyond the participating organisations, the research team also hoped to contribute to a wider understanding of CoPs. The use of formal and facilitated CoPs in the New Zealand PTE environment as a teacher support mechanism appears to be a new phenomenon. Additionally, evidence of the effectiveness of CoPs in the vocational education context through trialling a pilot programme is scarce in the available literature. This project therefore aimed to contribute to the existing knowledge and practice of CoPs as a professional development support mechanism in the vocational education space, and more broadly across the New Zealand tertiary education sector.

1.2 Background and Participating Organisations

This collaborative project builds on an earlier Ako Aotearoa Hub-funded project: *Identification of tutor practices that achieve positive outcomes for Youth Guarantee students* (available from <https://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/>), in which the potential of CoPs to enhance and shift YG tutors' understanding and enactment of effective pedagogy was identified as an area for future investigation. The current project is the realisation of that vision, and has extended the participants from one, to three participating organisations:

Workforce Development Ltd (WDL)

WDL has a strong success record dating over 20 years, based in Hawke's Bay, but with tutors and training programmes also based in Auckland and Wellington. The PTE offers a range of programmes in youth work, early childhood education, food safety and hospitality, with the latter also offered as a Youth Guarantee pathway programme.

The College of Future Learning (FutureCol)

FutureCOL is a PTE with programmes in cookery, information technology and management, offered via campuses in Hastings and Queenstown. It is jointly owned by two directors, and the National Tertiary Education Consortium (Ntec), a grouping of four PTEs, including FutureCOL, although FutureCOL operates as a stand-alone entity, with small but growing Youth Guarantee funded students.

G&H Training Ltd (G&H)

G&H, established in 1987, specialises in training for trades, including automotive and carpentry, both of which are offered as Youth Guarantee options. With a head office in Napier, G&H have seven other training venues; Whangarei, North Shore and East Tamaki in Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington and New Plymouth.

1.3 Methodology

Participative action research methodology guided the design, implementation and evaluation of this project, with the lead researcher playing an integral role as CoP guide, workshop facilitator, resource writer and meeting coordinator. The CoP trial incorporated an initial three-hour training workshop, and four subsequent monthly CoP meetings.

A review of the literature assisted in the initial design of the CoP approach which was implemented and trialled in this project. The trial commenced with a training workshop for the tutors which i) explained the concept and practice of CoPs; ii) described the expectations of the CoP activities in the project context; and iii) provided an opportunity for the tutors to identify how they would like to use the CoP for their pedagogical development. A copy of the workshop session plan is attached as *Appendix A*, the accompanying *Workbook* is downloadable from the project page on Ako Aotearoa's website (www.ako.aotearoa.ac.nz).

The primary data sources included:

- i) Transcribed minutes of the CoP meetings, summarising the tutors' discussion points and any shared strategies and resources;
- ii) An online survey conducted with the tutors to collect their feedback on the CoP meetings at the three-month, mid-way point;
- iii) Summative interviews with the tutors conducted at the conclusion of the CoP meeting period to gather their feedback about the effectiveness and usefulness of participating in a CoP; for example, how the CoP supported their professional development; the advantages of participating in a CoP; any challenges or negative aspects of being a member of a CoP.

The number of tutors who participated in each phase of the project varied. Overall, 15 individual tutors were involved and contributed their reflections, comments and feedback to the primary data, although some had been unable to attend one or more of the monthly meetings (which fluctuated from 9 to 12 attendees) due to prior teaching commitments, travel requirements or poor connectivity through the Skype platform. Thematic and content analysis

of the tutor interviews and CoP meeting minutes underpinned the data analysis methods used to confirm the key findings of the project.

1.3 Structure of this Report

While the development of this project proposal was supported by a scoping literature review, part of the rationale for developing and evaluating the CoP as a mechanism for enhancing PTE tutors' pedagogical practice, was the very lack of existing studies in this field. Our review did not identify any dedicated, evidence-based examples of CoPs being implemented in the vocational education setting, particularly in New Zealand PTEs, with this level of focus on professional development. Therefore, it was decided that this report would not include a 'Literature Review' section which would necessarily introduce a multitude of discussion topics outside the purview of this project. Rather, we have chosen to place our observations, findings from the data, and the participants' voices to the forefront. Relevant conclusions from the broader literature are inserted where they underscore a particular point, supporting, but not shaping, the immediacy of the project and the findings.

2. The Project, the Findings

The findings from this project are presented as a sequential depiction and description of the CoP process implemented over the six-month period. Within each section, tutors' comments are included to provide a real sense of their experiences and perspectives as they participated in the CoP.

2.1 The Workshop

The project commenced with a three-hour training workshop, providing the tutor participants with the opportunity to explore the concept of CoPs and make decisions about their expectations, the purpose, the process, and the outcomes of the four monthly CoP meetings they would engage in. Three tutors were unable to attend the workshop, however they did receive a copy of the *Workbook* with the invitation to talk through the key points in this with the researcher before the CoP meetings started.

The workshop was a professional learning opportunity that fell within the framework of a CoP as it provided scaffolding for the tutors to begin developing collegial relationships within a 'rehearsal space' (Pemberton et al., 2007). The common ground that cemented their participation was a shared domain of interest and practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as YG tutors working in the PTE environment. A *Workbook* and accompanying session plan were

developed (*refer Appendix A*) as a guide for the tutors to work through the central elements of CoPs, and engender familiarity with CoPs prior to participating in CoP meetings.

The workshop commenced with a discussion about the purpose and process of a CoP, and the benefits of being part of and belonging to a CoP group. A key focus was the qualities and skills of CoP participants in terms of both what people bring to a CoP and how they influence the group dynamic. Five approaches operating within a CoP were covered:

1. Trust
2. Feedback
3. Listening and Questioning
4. Leadership
5. Group Dynamics

The tutors were encouraged to consider how each of these approaches influenced the structure and process of a CoP and how they would apply in the ensuing CoP meetings. A central activity in the workshop involved them in devising a purpose statement for their CoP. This activity was mentioned by two of the tutors in their final interview as being particularly helpful in establishing people's expectations of the CoP before the meetings commenced. The tutors initially worked in two groups with the expectation to reach consensus on the CoP's purpose. The final purpose statement combined both groups' ideas and read:

"The CoP is a group of professional educators working collaboratively to support and enhance pedagogical practices. The group shares a concern and a passion for what they do, and will learn from each other to advance their own knowledge and skills."

Because the CoP meetings would involve some of the tutors participating online via video-conferencing, a section of the workshop detailed the strategies, benefits and potential challenges of online meetings. Context and process variables of video-conferencing (VC) were presented as areas for the tutors and the researcher to explore in the project. Examples of questions to guide this included:

- ❖ What technological configurations and support are necessary to use VC in CoPs?
- ❖ What personal factors (motivation, experience, personality), if any, are predictors for success in using VC in CoPs?
- ❖ To what degree do CoP members need to meet each other and/or get acquainted before using VC-ing?
- ❖ How does VC impact CoP group dynamics?

Feedback in the final interview from the tutors who did not attend the workshop highlighted how it was more difficult for them to initially understand the purpose of the CoP and know how to participate in the meetings. The level of group familiarity developed during the workshop was altered in the first meeting, given that some of the tutors had not attended the workshop. This also influenced the sense of trust and openness in the group. By the fourth meeting, and based on the tutors' feedback, they felt trust had developed significantly and people were feeling comfortable with candidly sharing about themselves and their teaching practice.

2.2 The CoP Meetings

Four two-hour CoP meetings were held monthly on a Friday afternoon to accommodate the tutors' teaching schedules. Two tutors participated online in each meeting whilst the others met face to face in a central location. Unfortunately challenges of online accessibility prevented two of the original participants from participating in the CoP meetings. The online platform created a shared space and connected the tutors across geographical boundaries and organisations; this was a key aspect of the project, to enable cross-institutional participation across the three PTEs. Some of the tutors were located in Wellington and Auckland, whilst the project was coordinated in Hawke's Bay, which enabled Hawke's Bay-based tutors to attend the CoP meetings face to face.

The original intent had been for the tutors based outside Hawke's Bay to participate in the meetings via video-conference. Skyping was eventually agreed on as the most accessible form of online connection. In their final interview, two of the tutors commented on the benefit of the online option as being a means to link up with other regions and be part of the CoP, which they could not have done if it required face to face meetings only. Participation in a CoP involves action and connection (Clarke, Partridge & Petersen, 2017). Clarke et al., in their Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) online programme, used Adobe Connect® as the platform to enable 'virtual face to face' interaction across a geographically diverse group of educators. The tutors connecting via Skype in this project aimed to achieve a similar experience.

The first meeting commenced with a review of the purpose of a CoP and the purpose statement the tutors had devised at the training workshop. This aimed to 'set the scene' for how the tutors would use the meeting time to gain benefit for their teaching practice and achieve value-for-time. Revisiting the purpose and process was particularly important as four of the ten tutors who attended the first CoP meeting had not attended the workshop.

At this point, we collectively recognised the importance of structure. Wenger-Trayner et al. (2015) describe several myths about CoPs, one of which is that CoPs are always self-organising (p. 3). As they explain, some communities do self-organise and are very effective, but most communities need some cultivation to be sure that members get high value for their time. This is further supported by Wenger (2000) who earlier suggested that leadership in a CoP is often distributed, and co-chairs or co-convenors facilitate the meetings, communicate with members and ensure that the CoP's activities and outcomes are documented.

It was apparent by the end of the second CoP meeting that the meeting process and therefore the group would be advantaged by creating a more formal approach. It was important for the researcher and the tutors to acknowledge that some of the tutors were more vocal than others and that this resulted in one or two people dominating the discussions. A more structured approach was therefore introduced in the third meeting, where each tutor had ten minutes to give feedback on two key questions they had been asked to reflect on prior to the meeting (refer 2.2.3 below). When this 'round robin' was completed, the meeting was then an open agenda for the remainder of the meeting time.

Wenger-Trayner et al. talk about how "communities of practice decisions need to be taken, conditions need to be put in place, and strategic conversations need to be had" (p. 3). They state that not all members see value in being involved in these processes, and a coordinator is a useful structure to have in place. During the final interviews, the tutors all agreed that the meetings needed to have a more formal structure and be coordinated by one person. They suggested that the coordinator role could be rotated around the group once the CoP was established and members were clear about the purpose and process of the meetings.

2.2.1 Email correspondence

In keeping with her role as facilitator-guide for the newly emergent CoP, the researcher maintained a planned, structured email connection with the tutors throughout the project time-frame. This additional mode of contact created another set of strategies which contributed to and became integral to the CoP. The emails were sent to the tutors following each CoP meeting, consisting of the researcher's reflection of the CoP meeting, a reminder of two central questions which the tutors were encouraged to use as a reflective tool between meetings and to feedback on at the next meeting, plus other reflective activity ideas and links to suggested teaching and learning resources. An example of an email message is attached as *Appendix B*.

2.2.2 Meeting discussions

Seeley-Brown and Duguid (1991) suggest that CoPs act as a learning community, one in which members use their peers as a source of knowledge and professional development. As described earlier in this report, the tutors became more open and willing to talk about their teaching practice and experiences as the meetings progressed and a level of trust was developing. The conversations were scribed by the researcher and presented as meeting minutes, which were emailed to the tutors following each meeting.

A range of topics and conversation themes were discussed during the CoP meetings. As a group of YG tutors, there were commonalities in the subjects and challenges raised, with topics encompassing student learning, improving teaching practices, learning new teaching techniques, and organisational policies and procedures. This lent itself to the group members being able to respond or suggest strategies and solutions which were relevant and could be applied in each tutor's teaching context. Examples of topics raised and discussion generated across the group included:

- ❖ How to increase and improve student engagement
- ❖ Managing disruptive students
- ❖ How to get students to attend class and come back
- ❖ Integrating unit standards into one project
- ❖ Project-based learning
- ❖ Literacy and numeracy

Various strategies and teaching approaches were offered by the tutors when a topic was introduced. There was an obvious willingness to support each other, illustrated by the immediate sharing of ideas and experiences, and offers to share resources such as session planning approaches, student activities, and links to websites. A sample of the minutes from the second CoP meeting is attached as *Appendix C*, to provide an idea of how this document served as a record of the discussion but also as a resource of strategies and ideas for the tutors to use or follow up back in their workplace.

2.2.3 Time use between the CoP meetings

As well as participating in the monthly CoP meetings, another key aspect and expectation of the tutors was to reflect on their teaching practice between each meeting. This created an interlinking of the meetings so that they did not become 'stand-alone' professional development events with no relevance to or translation of the tutors' learnings from the meetings into their teaching practice. Each tutor was given a reflective journal resource (*refer Appendix D*) at the first CoP meeting which they could choose to use. Encouraging an ongoing

focus on their practice outside the CoP meetings also provided opportunities for the tutors to bring their ideas and experiences to share with each other each time they met.

When asked in the final interview how they had used the time between the CoP meetings, all of the tutors stated they engaged in self-reflection already but that the CoP had prompted them to be more aware of this and also how they reflected on their practice.

2.3 Midpoint Online Evaluation

Midway through the four-month period of CoP meetings, the tutors were asked to complete an online survey as a formative evaluation of the project experiences at that point. At the time of the survey they had participated in the training workshop and two CoP meetings. Table 1 provides examples of their feedback in response to five questions.

Table 1 Midpoint Online Survey

Survey Question	Tutor Responses
Having participated in the Community of Practice (CoP), what is your opinion of the 'ideal' environment for the CoP meetings?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have access to Skype for those who can't be there • Where we've been meeting has been sufficient • Informal gathering in comfortable surroundings; e.g. good temperature and lighting. An open forum • If the electronics had been working properly the venue would have been fine • I believe we could have achieved better contribution and involvement with whole group face to face participation
What have been the positive aspects of the CoP and the meetings so far?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting together as people with a common goal being able to share ideas, goals and grievances • Interchange of ideas and sharing of issues within group • Learning new ideas from others and using them in my daily teaching where relevant • Reflecting on my own practice and gaining knowledge of alternate processes • Meeting fellow colleagues with similar student types sharing ideas problem solving and discussions meeting a great bunch of hard workers
What benefits are you gaining from being involved in the CoP?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning from each other • Opportunity for reflection on my practice • Gaining access to new knowledge • Sharing of strategies and approaches in the group • Upskilling • Sharing a sense of common purpose
How have you been using the time between meetings?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly reflecting on my teaching practice • Introducing new approaches in my teaching • Researching and sourcing new/innovative teaching and learning strategies • Not as well as I should be

<p>What suggestions do you have for adapting or improving the CoP meetings?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maybe if funded we could go to those that can't come to us, visit each other's work places to get a better picture • I prefer to have an agenda as a guide only for each meeting that helps participants with preparation • Improvements on time spent on one specific subject or speaker, I felt not all members of the meeting had an opportunity to give their perspective as often subject matter was monopolised by one or two • Involving more groups or better attendance from those groups who are involved
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As Table 1 shows, the online aspect of the meetings was a challenge at times for those Skyping in to the meeting because of the quality of the transmission. The tutors were clearly benefitting from the CoP as evidenced in their comments about learning new ideas, finding solutions to problems and coming together with colleagues sharing a common purpose. As described earlier in the Findings section of this report, a degree of formal structure was introduced in the third CoP meeting, as some of the tutors were dominating the conversations. In the next section which provides a summary of the tutors' feedback in their final interview, several opinions expressed in the midpoint survey are reiterated and expanded on.

2.4 The Final Interview

A final interview was conducted with the tutors directly following the fourth and final CoP meeting. Obtaining their overall perspectives and conceptions of the CoP experience was a critical part of determining the impact and usefulness of a CoP as a tutor professional development support mechanism. In addition to asking whether they had suggestions for changing or improving the CoP, another question asked them how they saw the place of CoPs in their organisation in the future.

The tutors' feedback was overwhelmingly positive regarding the collegial support and encouragement that had been offered within the group. This was demonstrated by their comments about appreciating the chance to engage with like-minded people and finding solutions to challenges they all shared. A summary of representative responses follows:

Table 2. Final Interview

Interview Question	Tutor Responses
<p>What is important in establishing a CoP?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone needs to be assured that what they talk about and share stays in the group • Expect it to take time for people to feel comfortable • Developing a purpose and understanding of a CoP during the initial workshop • Reaching agreement as a group about the purpose and process

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are able to commit their time and commit to the process • Getting the technology working well right from the start • The original documents (<i>Workbook</i>) and the training workshop were very helpful in helping me and I would say the other tutors know what to do to get the most out of the CoP meetings
How useful was it to get together as a group of tutors and share teaching practices?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very useful as it provided the opportunity to help other people teaching in similar areas • Made connections with other organisations • Excellent, because we are geographically isolated so don't get to see other colleagues on a regular basis • The opportunity to have discussion in an open environment was great. It was a safe place where I didn't have to be worried about repercussions • Although venting frustrations was not the main purpose of the CoP meetings, it was still good to have the opportunity to talk about what is not going well • I picked up a whole lot of ideas I can transition into my own practice • Helped me realise I am actually doing okay in my teaching
What influences and creates the ideal environment for a CoP?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting the technology right • Comfortable - not always in a meeting room, neutral • Give people time to think, everyone has a turn • Having a diverse group of members and a good structure • Someone managing the group dynamics. People need direction to start with until the group is familiar with each other and familiar with the purpose, process and benefits of the CoP • A clear understanding of what a CoP is, how to participate
What are your thoughts about a combined CoP?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great to hear other voices and other people's ideas. • An even representation of each organisation, e.g. everyone from the same industry or context they are teaching in. Also, some of our group are not using project based learning (PBL) so there was a lack of common understanding of teaching in this way. We need to talk to other organisations using PBL • The more the merrier. Wider contribution gives us access to more knowledge and wisdom
What benefits did you gain from participating in the CoP?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet and interact with colleagues with the same goals - helping young people - and have conversations with them • Finding out about resources which will be really useful for my students, such as Pathways Awarua • Discovering how other tutors had similar problems and how they individually dealt with these • You actually do more listening than talking when you are not in a face to face context • Allowed me to reflect on my practice and provided a vehicle to action continual reflection

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was an opportunity to step out from my work environment which is rare • It prevents you getting stale and creates a freshness to your thinking • The isolation you feel as sole charge is lessened by being part of the CoP • It has made me think about my teaching and how I would like to introduce new approaches
<p>How did you use the time between the CoP meetings?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realised I need to become more disciplined in reflecting on my practice and process and set aside time • Prepared for the meetings. The emails helped because you knew what you would be reporting on • The CoP sparked things that I would go away and think about • The meetings consolidated my previous work and my own study in adult education • Keeping a journal
<p>What changes or improvements would you suggest for future CoPs?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A regular 'around the group' as a standard introduction to each meeting: what is working well, what is not working so well • A structured agenda to enforce the discipline of collaborative contribution and involvement • Video conferencing better than just audio • Visit each other's establishments • More structure, more activities (ice-breakers to share, swap resources), e.g. identify a problem and everyone chips in with possible solutions • Bring more people from other organisations in – people from different fields, different PTEs • Optional not compulsory • Emphasise people need to attend the initial training workshop
<p>How could the CoP have created more value-for-time for you?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more diverse group – the more the better • Have the meetings in a range of environments • Flexibility in the timing of meetings • A focus or theme for each meeting • A FaceBook page where you can put up agenda items so people can think about these before each meeting • Perhaps smaller break-out groups
<p>What place do you see a CoP having in your organisation as a professional development support tool?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a real opportunity for teacher development. You can discuss specific student issues in a safe environment • Opportunity to step out of the organisation for a time but still be with like-minded people • This is a good tool for induction of new staff • The meetings need to be regular and scheduled in if they are going to have any impact • Bi-monthly meetings would be best • I would definitely be keen to be involved in future CoPs

2.5 Key Themes Identified

Value to the tutors

There was consensus across the participant group that coming together as a group of tutors in a CoP was highly beneficial. As well as providing an opportunity to share practices and talk about challenges in their teaching, some of the tutors commented on the benefit of being part of a group that met regularly reducing the reality of geographical isolation in their organisation.

Wenger (1998) talks about a CoP as providing a mechanism for drawing on what individuals know and can do as well as what they can't do, which presents possibilities for creating a shared practice of mutual engagement. As the tutors' comments in Table 2 above illustrate, the opportunities to share what they know as well as ask for advice on issues or gaps in their knowledge were appreciated across the group. One participant shared a personal Journey:

“Early in the CoP I was seriously unhappy in the job – difficult students, limited resources. Once we got into it and it felt safer, I felt better about myself because I found that others have similar issues and challenges.”

Developing one's signature pedagogy as a teacher is an evolving process. The CoP was a new experience and a new opportunity for the tutors to consider, discuss, share and learn about their teaching practice. By the fourth and final CoP meeting, the tutors' comments indicated a shift along this 'evolving continuum' of realising their signature pedagogy. For example, *“I am recognising how my teaching style influences the students' learning”* and *“I am using more innovative teaching and learning strategies which I am confident and comfortable with”*. Another indicator of the tutors developing their signature pedagogy was their comments about increased engagement in reflecting on practice and how this was enabling them to evaluate their choice of teaching approach and its impact on the students.

Value to the organisation

“CoPs stop you from reinventing the wheel. You get ideas and tools from others who have been there, done that.”

The tutors from three different organisations, all dealing with YG students and programmes in different fields, highly rated the opportunity to learn from external colleagues. They recognised the tendency to rely on 'tried and true' teaching and learning practices from their own, or immediate colleagues' experience. The CoP meant a much wider exposure to ideas, resources, activities and strategies to improve learner engagement and outcomes, which

could be easily added to organisational knowledge. The tutors saw this as not only a useful professional development tool for those already in the field, but also its potential for induction purposes with new educators.

Although one tutor thought that a CoP would be more useful if the members had commonalities in terms of industry context and teaching approaches, several others stated that the opportunity for the CoP to involve people from across industries, teaching contexts and “*disciplinary boundaries*” (Teeter et al., 2011, p. 23) would be very beneficial, tapping knowledge that may not be available within the organisation:

“Having people from different teaching contexts is best. You can make comparisons with your own practice and get ideas you may never have thought of, which you can adapt in your own teaching.”

A culture of trust and respect

When asked what they thought was important to successfully establish a CoP, ‘people’ aspects such as feeling comfortable to share, and listening to each other, were always high on the list. The tutors enjoyed having their own experience and contributions recognised, as much as they did learning from others and picking up new ideas for lessons and classroom management.

The facilitator/coordinator role

There was strong support for the CoP to continue, the tutors all stating that they would be interested in participating in a CoP in the future. A growing sense of community and confidence in the purpose and process as the CoP had progressed were evident in their comments. However, several comments noted the importance of having someone who has experience in establishing a professional CoP to facilitate a training workshop, guide members through decision-making about the CoP purpose, and call and ‘chair’ meetings, at least in the early phases of the group’s formation. Based on the researcher’s use of regular email correspondence with the group members between the CoP meetings, this mode of connecting the group would be a beneficial activity and role for a coordinator. Several participants recognised the need for protocols around turn-taking and ensuring that all voices were heard.

Structure

A clear structure and process to the meetings was considered important by all participants. This included the usefulness of a meeting agenda, and specified time allocation to hear from each member in attendance. This carried over to the time between meetings as well, when

email communication from the facilitator assisted participants to keep focussed on the work: incorporating changes into their own practice, reflecting on results and noting shifts in understanding for future sharing with the group.

3. Summary: Analysis of the Findings

What was the effectiveness and usefulness of the CoP as a YG tutor professional development mechanism? As the tutors in this project commented, the CoP had provided them with opportunities on an ongoing basis to share their teaching experiences, successes and challenges, and listen to and learn from other tutors working in the shared context of teaching YG students. The chance to meet regularly over a four-month period meant the tutors could follow up on strategies they had learned about from each other and were experimenting with in their own teaching context, and continually explore new ideas and gather resources for their teaching. Challenges in their teaching were also brought to the meetings where they were treated with respect and assurance that these were commonly shared amongst the group members. The CoP provided a safe place for the tutors to share problems they were facing and explore solutions together.

As well as using the CoP meeting time to discuss and respond to teaching challenges, the tutors arrange to connect with each other outside the meetings, to share resources and meet to talk through strategies for enhancing their teaching practice. The use of time between meetings became a significant aspect of the CoP approach in supporting the tutors' practice.

Is a three-hour training workshop enough to prepare people for participating in a CoP? On its own, the workshop was not a CoP, but it certainly provided a foundation for the tutors' ensuing CoP meetings and initiated a process and expectation of collegial collaboration.

As with every CoP there were members (tutors) who 'dropped out' at various points over the project time-frame, which naturally had an influence as the group dynamic consequently changed. Competing commitments and personal events were provided as reasons for this. Regardless of the member cohort present at each meeting, the CoP meetings provided an opportunity for the tutors to discuss their teaching practice, whether this was in terms of challenges they were experiencing, issues they were struggling to resolve, or positive experiences and outcomes they were achieving. Whatever the discussion focus was, people were very willing to offer suggestions, describe how they had managed similar situations, and share strategies and resources which could potentially help.

There was unanimous agreement from the tutors that a combined CoP would be optimal for this type of professional development support mechanism to be effective and useful. The collaboration of tutors from three PTEs in this project was viewed as valuable in providing different perspectives, learning how other tutors worked with students in a variety of settings, and gaining new ideas they could transition into their own practice. Three of the tutors talked about “*not getting stale in your teaching*” “*stepping out of your own work environment which can be quite insular*” as significant benefits of a combined CoP approach.

The various topics that were discussed at each CoP meeting (refer p. 12) could often not be given sufficient time to explore in depth due to the time boundary of each meeting. For example, some tutors regularly mentioned how they were still finding their way with using project-based learning, whilst others highlighted students’ need for literacy and numeracy skill development which they felt unequipped to improve. Various adult learning principles and techniques also featured as an area for continued professional development for some of the tutors. The CoP meetings therefore became a mechanism for identifying current and ongoing professional development needs which could be met outside the meetings through targeted professional development events and activities within the tutors’ respective organisations and/or within the tertiary education sector.

The CoP provided a conduit for teachers to explore their practice and develop knowledge and skills. The benefits for teachers belonging to a CoP would be increased by positioning the CoP as one of several offerings in a professional development programme or package. Teachers could utilise the time between CoP meetings to capitalise on these professional development opportunities. Based on the findings from this project, professional development events organised internally by the organisation could include:

- ❖ Mini training sessions
- ❖ Workshops
- ❖ Invited speakers
- ❖ All staff professional development day/s
- ❖ A teaching and learning discussion topic on the (monthly) team meeting agenda

What is beneficial for an effective design of a CoP that encompasses online and face to face conditions? Findings from this project suggest the following:

- ❖ A shared domain of interest. In this case, tutors teaching foundation learners in the PTE environment;

- ❖ CoP members must be committed and prepared to learn from each other through engagement in the meeting process, discussion and sharing of knowledge and information;
- ❖ Encourage 'multiple presenters' to create a diversity of perspectives and approaches to teaching and learning and ensures a balance of contribution across the group;
- ❖ Provision of an online platform that enables connection across geographical boundaries organisational boundaries;
- ❖ Creation of opportunities and activities which encourages members to continue their professional development outside the CoP meetings.

4. CoP Implementation Guideline

Based on the process and activities involved in this project, and findings from a group of YG tutors engaging in a CoP, a guideline of sequential activities for implementing a CoP is suggested. Figure 1 provides a reflection of the CoP approach that was taken in this project and has been designed accordingly.

The first step in implementing the CoP was the facilitation of a workshop for the tutor participants. As this report has highlighted, the workshop provided an essential opportunity for the tutors to establish a relationship, explore the concept and practice of CoPs, and decide how they would come together as a group of educators in the CoP meetings. The researcher maintained regular contact with the tutors via email correspondence, immediately following each CoP meeting and as reminders for upcoming meetings. Inherent in the email messages was a focus on specific actions and activities they could engage to continue reflecting on their practice between the meetings. The tutors' discussions during each meeting were documented and attached to the follow-up email, acting as a reference to key points made or raised and a resource of strategies and ideas that had been shared.

Evaluation is central to this project and a core aspect of the CoP, acting as a tool for the tutors to formatively gauge effectiveness of the meetings and how the CoP was supporting them in their practice. Undertaking a summative evaluation at the conclusion of the CoP meetings provides another mechanism for people to discuss and reflect on their experiences in the CoP and determine the impact of the CoP on their practice.

Figure 1. CoP Implementation Guideline

Process	Tasks and activities
Training Workshop	Workbook and workshop session plan Purpose Statement activity Reflective Journal resource
Introductory Email	Reminder of first CoP meeting Reiterate purpose and process of the CoP Meeting agenda and suggested focus
CoP Meetings	Bi-monthly Two-hour duration Scribe takes meeting 'minutes' Meeting coordinator manages meeting process and group dynamics Rotate coordinator role around the group All members have opportunity to share, ask questions, discuss their practice
Email Correspondence	Email sent to all members following each meeting Includes copy of previous meeting 'minutes' Includes reflective questions for group members to consider and comment on at next meeting Meeting coordinator responsible for compiling and sending emails Meeting agenda or suggested focus for next meeting
Time between CoP Meetings	Tutor reflection on and in practice Trialling teaching & learning strategies Self-directed learning/researching in teaching & learning professional development events
Evaluation	Formative and summative (if CoP has an end date) Online survey Midpoint survey Summative interview Face to face, online, phone, email Informal feedback during CoP meetings

5. Conclusion

“Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.” (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015)

This report was written as a reflection of the approach that was taken in the project to design, implement and evaluate a CoP for tutor professional development. The proposed *CoP Implementation Guideline* (refer Section 4) has been designed accordingly, that is, the

guideline reflects the sequence, actions and types of activities that were taken to establish the CoP.

Based on the tutors' feedback at the conclusion of the CoP meetings, the successes of the CoP were many, including: i) the tutors' interest in continuing to participate in a CoP; ii) the connections made across three organisations; iii) the opportunity to be part of a CoP regardless of geographical distance; and iv) the sense of belonging to a group of educators with commonalities in teaching experiences, knowledge and challenges in their field of teaching and learning.

As Wenger-Trayner et al. (2015) state, a CoP provides a mechanism for practitioners to share practice, develop a repertoire of resources, and discover ways to address problems. An important aspect of this is that it takes time and sustained interaction. This project had a finite time-frame in which to design and trial a CoP to determine if this mechanism supported YG tutors in their pedagogical practice. By the conclusion of the four CoP meetings, the tutors' feedback indicated that they had benefitted significantly from participating in the CoP and saw themselves as continuing to benefit from belonging to a CoP in the future. The opportunity to investigate the impact of a CoP operating over a longer period of time would be an interesting next step as a follow up to this project, and also a key consideration for an organisation intending to implement CoPs as a teacher development initiative.

This project designed and trialled a CoP approach as a mechanism for supporting YG tutors' pedagogical practice. The CoP implementation guidelines presented in this report are transferable to other educational contexts and discipline cohorts for the provision of an ongoing, structured approach to professional development.

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APPENDIX A: Training Session Plan & Workbook (separate attachment)

CoP Workshop: Session Plan

	Content & Process	Resources
Start	<p>1. Introduce self & workshop focus, purpose & process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in a CoP to support professional practice • Trial the concept and practice of a CoP in the project to see how and/or what works in a CoP setting to support professional development • Use time between CoP meetings <p>2. Definition & Purpose Statement Cards:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i) Work in small groups of 3-4 ii) Distribute card sets iii) Discuss different purposes of a CoP iv) Create own key purpose statement for this CoP – individual & group purpose v) Group reaches consensus on group purpose of this CoP <p>3. Dimensions of a CoP:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i) Small group discussion – what do you consider to be key dimensions of a CoP? What would you add? Take out? Change language of? ii) Fill in rest of Dimensions diagram in <i>Workbook</i> <p>4. Stages of CoP Development:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i) Talk through diagram ii) Explain how these aspects of CoP development will be tracked for data collection purposes plus signalling what to expect as the CoP process for this group 	<p>Definition & Purpose Statements</p> <p>Workbook: Complete Dimensions Wheel</p> <p>Workbook: CoP - Stages of Development</p>

	<p>5. Potential Barriers & Enablers: Whole group discussion</p> <p>6. Skills & Qualities of CoP Participants:</p> <p>i) Work in small groups to decide key skills and qualities CoP participants need to possess and bring to the meetings</p> <p>ii) Fill in Profile table in own <i>Workbook</i></p> <p>7. Approaches operating within a CoP:</p> <p>i) Brainstorm as whole group – What are the key influences operating in a CoP?</p> <p>ii) Whole group discussion – Talk through each key influence in detail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust – Take a Moment • Feedback – Self-assessment checklist; activity • Communication • Leadership Activity • Group Dynamics – Whole group brainstorm 	<p>Workbook</p> <p>Workbook: CoP Participant Skills & Qualities Profile Table</p> <p>Workbook: Trust model, Leadership model, Feedback model, Communication, Group Dynamics</p>
<p>Continue</p> <p>15mins</p> <p>10mins</p>	<p>8. Establishing the project CoP: Whole group activity:</p> <p>i) In small groups/pairs, determine the CoP’s purpose, process & protocols, based on needs analysis discussion, i.e., develop CoP approach for the project</p> <p>ii) Whole group discusses ideas from pairs to create group CoP structure and processes</p>	
<p>Finish</p> <p>10mins</p>	<p>9. Where to from here?</p> <p>i) Establish dates for VC CoP meetings</p> <p>ii) Decide focus of first CoP meeting</p> <p>iii) Create agenda for CoP meetings throughout project time-frame</p> <p>10. Summarise workshop session</p> <p>11. What next?</p>	<p>Workbook</p>

APPENDIX B: Email Correspondence Example

29 March 2017

Hello everyone

Well, our second CoP meeting is coming up this Friday. I look forward to getting together with you as a group again (and I will talk with SPARK to make sure the audio works this time). We meet at 1:30pm at the SPARK offices in Napier, same venue as the first meeting.

As per my last email sent to you soon after our first CoP meeting, I hope you have spent time thinking about your teaching practice, in particular, the things you could and did change (I have pasted the questions again below). It will be good to hear from you about your reflections and actions.

The central idea of this CoP is to provide a space where you can reflect on and talk through/share teaching & learning practices. However, this is reliant on you working on and in your practice between meetings as well. Some questions to help you think about this:

- 1. How can you integrate student self-directed learning options into your session plans?*
- 2. How do you get a student 'ready to learn'?*
- 3. How can you link students' learning of the 'theory' within the fun activities you use?*

And lastly - and these two questions will be consistently asked each month:

- 1. What are two things you can change in your teaching practice that will improve/influence students' learning experiences and outcomes this month?*
- 2. What are two things that you have changed in your practice to improve/influence students' learning experiences and outcomes this month?*

See you Friday.

APPENDIX C: Meeting Minutes Sample

Second CoP: Meeting Notes

31 March 2017

Challenge

Student engagement

Solutions/Strategies

- ❖ Get students reading aloud, taking turns. Focus on the subject matter, not how well they can read
- ❖ This helps with students working through the theory and is helping their confidence
- ❖ Get students to use the whiteboard. It ends up they don't want to be left out
- ❖ Students have a choice as to how much they participate but with an expectation that they will participate
- ❖ Create a culture where everyone shares responsibility for the learning
- ❖ Create a safe, comfortable environment

Challenge

Disruptive cluster of students in the classroom

Solutions/Strategies

- ❖ Offer them a chance to talk elsewhere
- ❖ Shut them down (only temporary solution though)
- ❖ Emphasise the setting and purpose is not school, it's a workplace
- ❖ Tell the students some things about yourself – your background and experience in the field (build credibility as a teacher)
- ❖ Give the students opportunities to tell something of themselves as well
- ❖ Use the ILP process as a 'contract', i.e., this is what the student/s agreed to re-their learning goals
- ❖ Make the ground rules clear right from the beginning
- ❖ Incorporate collaborative and one-one learning

Challenge

Investing a lot of time in a student who is in the wrong course

Solutions/Strategies

- ❖ This is part of the ILP process which aims to link the student with the right course/learning pathway right at the beginning
- ❖ Not a decision to be taken lightly (vs "*just withdraw them*")

Challenge

How do you get students to turn up....and stay?

Solutions/Strategies

- ❖ Set up self-directed learning for late-comers
- ❖ Have consequences
- ❖ Make clear ground rules and involve students in establishing these so that they own them as much as the tutor
- ❖ Attendance is made the primary focus....*"They will pass the unit standard if they attend"* (will they?)
- ❖ Action plan with the student – then there is a formal boundary in place because of the plan
- ❖ Negotiate options
- ❖ Set goals with them to achieve 100% attendance
- ❖ Change mindset from *"They are supposed to be attending"* to *"I want them to learn"*; and having the desire to attract them there and keep them there
- ❖ Give them two chances, then they will have to catch up on their own
- ❖ Getting students involved in research and learning how to present findings, i.e., positioning the learning outcome as a research question for which they need to find the answer

Challenge

Integrating unit standards into one project

- How do you know what they have learned?
- How do you know they have learned in/from the project?

Solutions/Strategies

- ❖ Put criteria and structure in place within the project design
- ❖ Naturally occurring evidence makes it easier to collect evidence of learning across and against the unit standards
- ❖ Incorporate student formative self-assessments to decide their own learning
- ❖ What is the learning outcomes (and the components of learning within this)? List these on the whiteboard and in student self-checklists and discuss with the students throughout the learning/project

To Consider:

*How do you know students are learning?

*Who supports the tutor who is dealing with a difficult student?

*How much formative student self-assessment is occurring/being integrated in the learning/project?

APPENDIX D: Reflective Journal Resource

Reflective Journalling

It is useful for you to regularly reflect on and note actions and activities you engage in for your teaching practice, which may include changing or adapting your teaching, undertaking some professional development (like this CoP), conducting research into your specialist area of teaching, or reviewing your practice.

For the purpose of this project, please complete regular written reflections to record your thoughts, ideas and plans. These reflections will provide a basis for the group discussions at each CoP meeting as well. Your reflections will contribute to the data collection aspect of the project (no names will be included in reporting the data of course), and can include reflections on what you learned/gained from the CoP meetings. You can use the following template or use your own form of journal.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS
Date:
What is going well?
What is a problem I am facing and why is it a problem?
Skills and knowledge I am developing:
New ideas gained from today's meeting:
Other Reflections

Examples of Reflective Questions

Classroom Culture

- How are the relationships that I have with my students helping or hindering their ability to learn?
- How could the problems I have in my classroom be solved?
 - By clarifying expectations of the learning?
 - By developing rules/procedures to deal with these issues?
- What makes my students feel excited about coming to class?
- What choices have I given my students lately?

Curriculum and Instruction – Reflection on Assessment Practices

- How can I make the assessments really reflect the learning, so that they are not merely task completion or memorisation skills?
- Why did I choose this particular teaching and learning approach to cover this learning objective?
- What evidence do I have that my students are learning?
- What new strategies have I tried lately that might benefit student learning?
- In what ways am I challenging students in their learning?
- What do I do when students aren't learning in my classroom?
- How did the students benefit from this activity/class?

Collaboration and Professional Development

- In what area/s can I still improve professionally?
- What's stopping me from improving in these areas?
- In what way/s can I support my colleagues in their teaching and learning practice?
- How do my actions as a teacher show my belief that all students can learn?
- What do my actions as a teacher show that I take pride in my work?
- Are the relationships I have with my colleagues conducive to creating a collaborative culture focused on learning? How can I develop and enhance this collaboration?

Teaching Perspective

- What new ideas have I tried in my classroom lately that keep me (and the students) energised about teaching and learning?
- What have I done lately to ensure I remain an effective teacher?