What is a Community of Practice?

A Community of Practice (CoP) is defined as a group that forms to share resources, experiences and learnings for the purpose of developing its members’ professional practice. Communities of Practice are recognised as useful tools in supporting and developing academic and teaching staff who are new to transnational teaching. They can provide access to staff who have experience with unfamiliar contexts. This can also assist in quickly grasping the differences that may impact on teaching and learning.

As a method of professional development a CoP may involve academic and teaching staff working together to reflect on aspects of their teaching experience. Typically, CoP participants meet face to face or online to discuss their experiences and teaching challenges, approaches to dealing with new challenges and recurring problems and new research findings.

Wegner (2006) outlines three crucial characteristics of a CoP:

1. **The domain:** A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership implies a commitment to the domain and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes participants from others.

2. **The community:** In pursuing their interest in their domain, participants engage in joint activities and discussions, provide assistance and share information and experiences. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other.

3. **The practice:** A community of practice is not merely a community of interest. Participants in 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.

Why join a CoP?

Peer collaboration and review are at the heart of enhancing transnational teaching practice. Offshore teaching staff new to RMIT programs will benefit from focussed discussions with more experienced colleagues. Academic and teaching staff who are teaching offshore for the first time often find the advice from someone who taught the same course last semester very valuable. By engaging in a community of practice you can develop your own teaching practice as well as share ideas, enjoy peer support and contribute your own experiences to enhance the teaching knowledge and practice of other participants.
Common CoP activities

You could become part of a community of practice by:

• Speaking with your colleagues and asking questions about their experiences of teaching in RMIT programs offshore.

• Sharing your offshore experience by speaking to others or presenting your ideas and experiences at a meeting or workshop.

• Presenting a case study of your own experience and having others offer their ideas about how they might approach the issue.

• Finding a mentor or mentoring and supporting others.

• Becoming involved in induction training programs for new transnational staff.

• Suggesting an informal meeting of the teaching team, of which you are a member, to share teaching tips or to discuss teaching issues and challenges.

• Using the CoP network to find new contacts who may be able to assist to obtain information or resources.

Various communities and networks exist nationally and globally to support and encourage learning, teaching and academic practice, you can find some of them at RMIT:
http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/support/communities

In one RMIT example, the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning developed a community of practice to explore the destinations of graduates, their employability upon graduation and the relationship between field placements and subsequent employment.

Getting started

The pursuit of excellence in teaching is accentuated by the dialogue and exchange of ideas between staff in various communities of practice. There are a number of ways in which you can do this:

• Find out whether there is a teaching interest group in your School or College that meets regularly to discuss common transnational issues and approaches to teaching and learning.

• Talking to your School’s teaching and learning representative or staff in the Academic Development Group who will be able to provide you with advice and support or connections to the various interest groups.
Useful resources

Support is available from your Deputy Head of School (Learning & Teaching) or equivalent. Your College Academic Development Group or learning & teaching specialist can also provide advice, support and professional development.


This paper proposes ways to support inclusive communities of practice across diverse educational, cultural and geographic settings.


‘RMIT University Communities of Practice’ is a 2-minute video wherein Pauline Porcaro of the Academic Development Group, College of Business presents a case study using communities of practice.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AaytFu3UTgw