DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR TEACHER TRAINING:
Modes, Models, and Methods

Mary Burns

Education Development Center, Inc.

Washington, DC

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the following colleagues both near and far for providing information, resources, and fact-checking on this guide.

About the Author

Mary Burns is a senior technology and teacher professional development specialist at EDC. A former 10-year teacher in the United States, México, and Jamaica, she has worked in the area of technology-enabled professional development since 1997, instructing, designing, and evaluating both distance-based and face-to-face professional development for teachers, teacher educators, and instructional coaches. She has authored peer-reviewed papers, books, articles, and blog posts about teacher professional development, distance learning, and teaching with technology. She works in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States.

Preferred Citation

Burns, M. (2023). *Distance Education for Teacher Training: Modes, Models and Methods.* (2nd Edition). Washington, DC: Education Development Center.

Section II. Chapter 15

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Table of Contents

Best Practice: Successful distance education programs focus on building strong teacher communities.

15.1 Overview

There are numerous models of distance-based instruction and professional development. But teachers or teacher-candidates who wish to acquire new knowledge, learn new skills, and adapt their practice may be best served through a community approach that encourages learners to view model practices (in person or via video), practice using new approaches in their particular classroom setting, and regularly and critically reflect on their teaching, either while it happens or after the fact (Blitz, 2013; Burns & Dimock, 2007; Jimenez-Silva & Olson, 2012).

In studies of professional development across the globe, teachers consistently report that the most valuable benefits of online learning are those that relate to the social context of learning: "sharing information and knowledge" and "interacting with colleagues" (Voogt & Tondeur, 2015, as cited in Hennessy et al., 2022; Burns, in press). The majority of teachers indicate that the support they receive from other teachers in online discussions is very important to them (Burns, in press). As mentioned in the previous chapter, being part of an online community is linked to teacher satisfaction with their distance learning courses— and being part of a school-based community of teachers is linked to school change (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Hord et al., 2006).

The prominence of collegiality and community is not exclusive to online modes of distance education nor is it a recent phenomenon. Decades ago, teachers Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka cited the centrality of study groups, learning circles, and contact sessions as critical to their satisfaction with and success in print- and radio-based distance education programs (Perraton, 1993). In face-to-face professional development settings, particularly those involving learning technology, teachers have long pointed to a community of peers as critical to satisfaction with professional development (Blitz, 2013; Burns & Dimock, 2007; Dimock et al., 2001; Jimenez-Silva & Olson, 2012; South African Institute of Distance Education, 2005).

This chapter discusses the importance and formation of online learning communities for teachers as part of any distance learning program.

15.2 Types of Communities

Communities are groups of people bound together through shared connections that "transform individuals from a solitary status to membership of an identifiable group" (Lloyd & Duncan-Howell, 2010, p. 61). Their identities are defined by roles they play and the relationships they have within the community (Riel & Polin, 2004).

Professional learning communities of teachers are open and voluntary gatherings of small groups of teachers concerned with the general practice of teaching or specialist disciplines or areas of interest. Their cohesion is driven from regular interactions or "mere exposure" (Zajonc, 1968), through frequent meeting up, knowledge sharing, joint study, and developing new practices built on shared purpose, behavioral norms, and routines (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Riel & Polin, 2004, p.18).

Lloyd & Duncan-Howell (2010) argue that a community of teachers is, by definition, a *community of practice*—the most evolved and structured form of a professional learning community (p. 61). Wenger (1998) defines communities of practice as being organized around three dimensions:

1. Joint enterprise – An agreed-upon, negotiated purpose or goal with mutual accountability

2. Shared repertoire – Distinctive discourse framing a shared understanding of concepts, tools, and resources of practice

3. Mutual engagement – Common activity of participants playing distinctive roles in this joint work

Thus, a community of practice instantiates learning as both "a kind of action and a kind of belonging" (Wenger, 2009, as cited in Du Plessis and Muzaffar, 2010, p. 4). Chiu et al. (2007) place Wenger's description firmly in the virtual realm noting that online communities of practice consist of three "crucial" components: knowledge, people, and a social network. It is this knowledge-exchange through trusted and valued relationships that essentially motivates people to join online communities.

15.2.1 Online Communities

Within a professional learning community, technology can serve as a means for both communication and collaboration, through which teachers can create and become part of evolving and multiple networks of colleagues, some of whom they know and more of whom they have not yet met. Thanks to technology, there is a plethora of types of online communities. These span more loosely structured communities, such as personal learning networks or communities of interest, to professional learning communities to highly structured communities of practice.

Online communities of all types have emerged as an effective and cost-effective response to teachers' needs for professional development and support. In addition to their type, mentioned in the previous paragraph, online communities are extraordinarily diverse in their attributes. They can be voluntary or mandatory; arranged horizontally (e.g., composed of educators of the same level in the system) or vertically (e.g., educators who occupy different levels of the education system); they can be work-focused or socially driven; they can be facilitated or unfacilitated; and they can be created by a distance program or organically formed (Baptista & Sherman, 2018). They may vary in their affiliation, size, and openness. Examples of Web-based or mobile-based communities may include the following:

- *Organic, teacher-driven, small informal communities*, such as *WhatsApp* and *Facebook* teacher groups. These often are created by teachers who teach in the same school or district and are generally smaller in size. They are not part of any formal teacher professional development initiative. Many preceded the COVID-19 pandemic school lockdowns but thrived during and after the pandemic (British Council, 2015; Burns, in press). Other examples include teacher refugee communities in Syria, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, where interaction occurs via *Facebook* and *WhatsApp* (Jordan & Mitchell, 2020).

- *Communities that are part of a formal professional development initiative.* For example, Teachers for Teachers, discussed in Chapter 6, is typical of these types of communities. It is part of a larger, formal professional development initiative and thus smaller and more restricted in membership because of this affiliation (Mendenhall et al., 2017).

- *Large-scale, open but bounded networks.* One example is the Organization of American State's (OAS's) Inter-American Teachers Education Network (ITEN). ITEN partners with OAS member states' ministries of education and teacher education institutions to provide face-to-face, blended, and online professional development to a network of approximately 50,000 teachers in the Americas. Any teacher in any OAS country may join, regardless of

whether or not he or she has participated in any of the formal TPD offerings, but the community is closed to non-OAS country teachers (Organization of American States, 2022).

- *Large-scale, open, and affiliated networks.* These are membership-driven but open to dues-paying members anywhere. Examples include the International Society of Technology in Education (U.S.-based) and the Association for Learning Technology (UK-based). They offer large undifferentiated groups as well as special interest groups (SIGs) on a variety of topics.

- *Large-scale, completely open, unaffiliated Web communities or social media groups.* These are often formally organized and administered, although unaffiliated with any particular professional development initiative or region. They are thus open to all teachers anywhere. Examples include *We Are Teachers, Classroom 2.0,* or the Facebook *Educators Network* site.

Unlike many formal professional development courses, online communities tend to focus on practice-based and informal learning. If provided with the time, support, and resources, teachers in an online community may co-develop lesson plans together; share curriculum ideas; plan online collaborative projects; discuss pedagogy, classroom management, assessment, or content-related topics; post experiences, lessons learned, or self-assessments; and engage in peer mentoring. The benefits of these activities increase when teachers are *also* engaged in structured teacher training and/or professional development programs (Gaible & Burns, 2007, p. 64; see also Duncan-Howell, 2010).

15.2.2 Benefits of Professional Learning Communities

Online technologies offer several important benefits for community formation: They are flexible, convenient, and unconstrained by time or place (Barab et al., 2001); they broaden learning and understanding beyond the classroom; they connect teachers with like-minded colleagues who share similar interests and passions; they can extend the work of an offline community of practice (Baptista & Sherman, 2018); and they allow members to benefit from "the strength of weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973). Teachers report that these interactions with new colleagues are beneficial because they provide broader social interaction and make it possible for teachers to acquire new knowledge from people with whom they would not normally interact (Duncan-Howell, 2010). (*Chapter 5: Online Learning* discusses in detail the technology tools that can promote online communities of practice.)

Professional learning communities—online, blended, mobile, and in-person—more broadly share several tangible attributes that have a direct impact on teacher education programs, both distance and face-to-face, and on the quality of instruction in schools.

- They provide continuous and self-generating professional development for teachers through flexible, authentic, and personalized opportunities for learning (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Perry et al., 2021).

- They reinforce and sustain many of the skills, concepts, and strategies promoted in teacher training or professional development sessions (Blitz, 2013; Burns & Dimock, 2007).

- By collaborating with colleagues, teachers can customize, personalize, and adapt new skills and concepts to their particular setting, enlisting colleagues to help them critique and improve implementation of a particular idea or strategy (Chiu et al., 2007).

- They can promote problem-solving and innovation and nurture a public repertoire of agreed-upon best practices at a particular school or set of schools (Burns & Dimock, 2007; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2011).

- They can help promote a sense of collective efficacy among teachers—a belief by teachers as a staff that they have the skills to make a positive difference in student learning (Donohoo, 2017, p. 3).

- They increase the social capital of a school; that is, the school as a whole may function better because the collective ties of its members lead to an improvement in the common good of the school (Burns & Dimock, 2007).

- Teachers who collaborate online are engaged with the group, develop a sense of collegiality, improve their knowledge of subject and pedagogical content, and intend to modify their instructional practices accordingly (Blitz, 2013; Dikkers, 2018).

- Creating supportive environments for teacher collaboration encourages teachers to engage in informal leadership roles, thus creating "a pipeline for future teacher leaders" (Teacher Leadership Consortium, 2011).

- Within a community of practice, isolation is replaced by an ethos of collegiality, sharing, and collaboration—all of which make teachers feel more successful, both individually and collectively (Burns & Dimock, 2007; Dikkers, 2018; Hord et al., 2006).

- Primary and secondary school teachers with a history of sharing, or university faculty who have collaborated on articles and projects, are more comfortable engaging in the sorts of practices that promote community and school improvement, such as online and offline collaboration, sharing resources and ideas with teachers, and help-seeking behaviors (Nistor et al., 2012; Riverin & Stacey, 2008).

There are a number of globally recognized communities of practice that can serve as exemplars for distance programs or education entities wishing to develop a professional learning community model. These programs are typically part of formal professional development efforts. Singapore's Teachers Network learning circles involve between 4 and 10 teachers and a facilitator who meet monthly to solve common problems using action research methods (Academy of Singapore Teachers, n.d.). Across Japan, a lesson study approach (discussed in Chapter 9) involves teams of teachers who prepare and teach different lessons, observe one another's lessons, provide feedback, and work together to review.

15.3 Developing Communities of Practice

Research on professional learning communities in general and online communities specifically is still fairly fragmented (Blitz, 2013). Thus, many recommendations for promoting effective professional learning communities are the same for online, blended, and in-person modalities. Because *communities of practice* are often the most difficult types of communities to form (see Figure 15.1, below), this section focuses on fostering and nurturing communities of practice via the following strategies.

15.3.1 Understand the Distinctions among Communities and Help Learners through the Stages of Community Formation

Three misconceptions persist in relation to the idea of community formation among teachers. First, community of any sort does not develop *ex nihilo*—it must be carefully planned, designed, and cultivated (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2011). Next, in much of the literature on community formation, terms such as "community," "professional learning communities," "communities of learners," and "communities of practice" remain ill-defined, erroneously conflated, and used interchangeably. Third, in the research on teacher change and teacher professionalism (Hord et al., 2006), "community" is often defined as an end in and of itself. Yet not all communities are similar nor are they equal, as Figure 15.1 demonstrates.

Broadly and briefly, communities often begin as collections of individuals who come together around a *shared interest*. If support, time, resources, frequent opportunities for learning, and emphasis on continuing and outside-the-course learning are built into the distance learning program, these communities of interest can become *communities of learning*. If learners are encouraged to work together to implement a new idea in their

classroom or in micro-teaching; shown how to collaborate; given time, resources, and the support of a skilled facilitator to begin putting into practice what they have learned; and if they are assessed—not for the purposes of judging or evaluating their initial efforts but for the purpose of improving and reinforcing their efforts—learners can move toward formation of a *community of practice*.

The progression is not as linear as defined here, nor will every community need to be a community of practice, but it is important to understand these distinctions so that distance learning programs can envision and intentionally design their desired community and thus support teachers through these stages of community formation (Burns & Dimock, 2007).

Communities can certainly come together virtually, but some form of face-to-face interaction is often necessary for groups to really cohere (Perry et al., 2021). This is particularly true for individuals who have not experienced a professional community and/or who are new to the whole experience of online learning, especially when collaborating with peers in different locations.

15.3.2 Pay Careful Attention to the Initial Stage of Community Development

The initial stage of community is critical to subsequent stages because it is at this crucial point that the teacher is persuaded or propelled into embracing professional development's learning activities—or rejecting them. Thus, distance education programs must devote particular attention to this initial stage, focusing on the following areas.

Content (Domain). For teachers, professional development and engagement require interaction with ideas about education, classroom practice, and their personal beliefs (Girvan et al., 2016). Thus, the "what" (or the domain or content) is a critical driver of teacher communities (Chiu et al., 2007). Content should address the needs of all stakeholders involved in teaching and learning. It should be authentic and directly related to

teachers' concerns and be "sympathetic" to their specific needs as learners (Duncan-Howell, 2010, p. 325). A facilitator may narrow the scope of a given community of learning or practice to make it as relevant as possible and to help generate deeper discussion around a set of topics (Baptista & Sherman, 2018, p. 5).

People. Because communities of practice require extensive planning to be beneficial, the group must identify members who will take the lead to support planning and execution and empower these members (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2011). Domain knowledge and individual feelings of expertise strongly predict participation in a professional community, but all members must be treated as having expertise (Baptista & Sherman, 2018; Nistor et al., 2012). Measures that assess team dynamics—such as work routines, communication, group norms, leadership styles—and how well a professional learning community reaches their goals can aid in designing and implementing learning communities and communities of practice (Blitz & Schulman, 2016, p. 4).

Practices. Practices recommended in research literature include promoting interaction by structuring collaboration; providing opportunities for participants to shape the goals, structure, and assessment of the collaboration; allowing groups to develop their own guidelines for co-learning and interaction (pairing expert learners with less experienced learners, for example); peer assessment; and designing activities that promote self-reflection (Commonwealth of Learning, 2008; Girvan et al., 2016; Laurillard, 2016; Lloyd & Duncan-Howell, 2010).

Protocols. As discussed in Chapter 13, protocols are scripts or a set of prescribed steps or prompts to structure focused, intentional, and deliberative conversations. They are particularly helpful when groups are forming and can help to keep conversations professional and neutral. There are numerous protocols that professional learning communities of practice can use depending on the purpose of the conversation. *Tuning*

Figure 15.1
Types of Communities and Their Characteristics
(Burns & Dimock, 2007)

	Community of Interest	Community of Learning	Community of Practice
Purpose	• Teachers connect to one another via a shared professional interest.	• Teachers come together around a "joint enterprise"— to learn about a particular concept, skill, or tool.	• Teachers come together around a "joint enterprise"—but they plan and implement a particular concept, skill, or tool. • The goal is to develop a body of shared practical knowledge (domain) that can be jointly implemented.
Formation	• Initial stage of community formation. • Loosely formed, largely informal, little internal coherence. • May be formed with the support of external actors (institution leader or professional development providers). • Though formally sanctioned, they may not have norms, or enforced norms, rules or activities designed to achieve specific goals.	• More developed stage of community formation. • More formal with greater internal coherence. • May be formed with the support of external actors (institution leader or professional development providers), but the impetus is sustained by activities and motivations of group members. • Formally sanctioned, continuous networks with norms, rules and activities designed to achieve specific goals.	• Most developed stage of community formation. • Highly formal and a high degree of internal coherence. • May be formed with the support of external actors (institution leader or professional development providers), but the impetus is driven by joint activities and the motivation of group members. • Formally sanctioned, continuous networks with norms, rules and activities designed to achieve specific goals.
Orientation	• May or may not be (explicitly) goal oriented.	• Goal-oriented.	• Goal-oriented.
Focus	• On the interest or innovation itself. • Emphasis is on gathering information and making connections for the purposes of self-knowledge or to share with colleagues.	• Explicit emphasis is on learning (situated and otherwise), knowledge construction, and metacognition. • While there may be an *expectation* of implementing what is learned, this expectation may not be explicit or operationalized.	• The emphasis is explicitly on application: putting learning into practice, implementation, and shared action. • While learning is emphasized, application of learning is the real, understood focus. • There may be mechanisms and protocols in place to ensure this shared implementation.

	Community of Interest	Community of Learning	Community of Practice
Interaction	• Characterized by loose-to-moderate ties among group members. • May or may not meet on a regular basis. • Characterized along a continuum of interactions from communication to cooperation to collegiality. • Interactions are often intermittent and not governed by any recognized norms. • May be some degree of reciprocity (i.e., individuals exchange ideas and help one another for mutual benefit).	• Characterized by moderate-to-strong ties among group members. • Highly formed and may meet on regular basis for purposes of mutual learning. • Characterized along a continuum of interactions from cooperation to collegiality to collaboration. • Higher degree of reciprocity. • Formal and informal norms of interaction may be enforced by group members.	• Characterized by strong ties among group members. • Highly formed and meets regularly for purposes of collaboration. • Characterized by ongoing collaboration and joint implementation. • Highest degree of reciprocity. • Formal and informal norms of interaction are enforced by group members. • Distinguished by the strength and depth of the culture that it establishes and which, in turn, supports it (Riel & Polin, 2004, p. 18)
Primary activities	• Investigation and exploration of skill, concept, or tool. • Sharing resources or experiences.	• Deeper investigation of skill, concept, or tool, with the understood goal of application. • Sharing resources, experiences, and ideas about practice.	• Deeper investigation and application of skill, concept, or tool. • Sharing resources, experiences, and ideas about practice. • May involve parallel teaching, co-teaching, or peer observation and feedback.
Duration	• May be short-lived or dormant, recurring as added information about a particular interest emerges or as a new innovation is presented.	• Sustained over the life span of the professional development or course of instruction. • May continue beyond the life of the course of instruction but often requires external or sustained intervention.	• Has the greatest chance of continuing beyond the life of the course of instruction if collaboration becomes the norm, but these, too, can dissipate when the focus on the domain concludes. • Duration possibly linked to sustained or external intervention.

protocols can help with planning. Other protocols include *warm and cool feedback* (for critiquing a colleague's work), the *consultancy protocol* (to address a problem), or a *critical friend*[1] conversation protocol (also for feedback or idea generation). Two excellent resources for these and other protocols are the School Reform Initiative (where the previous protocols reside) and the National School Reform Faculty.[2]

15.3.3 Organize Learners into Cohorts and Design Frequent Opportunities for Interaction with the Instructor and Peers

As mentioned in Chapter 7, the most successful distance education models have moved from the model of the solo learner to those based on learners as part of a community. As noted in Chapter 14, online teacher-learners report that peer-based online learning is "deeper and more meaningful" than non-peer-based online learning experiences (Burns, 2013; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016).

Frequent study groups, get-togethers, co-planning, or observation sessions have been features of successful print- and audio-based distance education courses (Perraton, 1993). As mentioned in Chapters 13 and 14, increased interaction with online instructors and classmates—face-to-face, blended, and online—lowers attrition rates and increases satisfaction rates associated with an online course of study.

While cohorts are important, also important is a strategy for grouping a certain cohort of teachers. For instance, teachers may be organized as follows:

1. *Homogeneously.* Sharing a particular set of characteristics or abilities, such as geographic proximity, or similar grade-level, performance-level, or status (e.g., novice teachers)

2. *Heterogeneously.* Representing diversity of the above characteristics in tiered groups (more, less, and least expert)

3. *Randomly.* For evaluation purposes[3]

There are advantages and disadvantages to each grouping strategy. Much of the research appears to argue for organizing teacher-learners as *mixed-ability* groups with a range of abilities in a particular area—for example, content knowledge. Jackson & Bruegmann (2009), in their study of "knowledge spillovers" among teachers, report that new teachers benefit most from exposure to high-ability peers. Teachers who are more likely to reflect on experiences that focus on classroom teaching are more likely to report a change to their professional practice than those who do not (Camburn & Han, 2015).

15.3.4 Focus on Collaboration as Part of Course Design to Stimulate Community

Collaboration and community may not come naturally—particularly in an online environment. It may be more difficult, particularly if teachers operate in educational or cultural environments that emphasize hierarchy, conformity, and/or individuality or if courses are asynchronous.

Yet these ongoing and meaningful interactions and the practice of "working together" are the levers that transform a collection of individuals into a coherent community. However, collaboration is not simply defined by its group-based nature. It has to be designed, taught, and nurtured. Distance education programs can foster a sense of collaboration and community by:

- Making collective learning and the attainment of common goals, versus individual goals, a central feature of the online course or program (Doig & Groves, 2011; Dudley, 2019; Laurillard, 2016)

- Helping community members understand the characteristics of collaboration—positive

---

[1] A "critical friends" group also can be a type of community of practice or professional learning community.

[2] See https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols/ and https://nsrfharmony.org/protocols/ Both sites have dozens of free protocols

[3] Refer back to Chapter 14, Section 14.2. For more information on *homogeneous and heterogeneous groupings, see* https://tinyurl.com/5n72xfts

interdependence, promotive interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and small-group skills, and group processing (Johnson et al.,1990)

- Orienting learners about the stages of community formation; what true collaboration involves; how to engage in conflict, come to consensus, avoid free-riding behavior; and how to strengthen and stretch their expertise (Burns, 2016)

- Ensuring that instruction is learner-centered (Commonwealth of Learning, 2008)

- Integrating collaboration into course standards, activities, assignments, and assessments so that learners share and leverage knowledge to achieve learning goals (Burns & Bodrogini, 2011)

- Explicitly scaffolding for learners how to collaborate; this can take place via facilitator modeling or protocols (Baptista & Sherman, 2018; Myung et al., 2020)

- Providing time, structure, and supports for distance education learners and their instructors and among distance education learners (Myung et al., 2020)

- Promoting genuine and meaningful discussions that promote and respect honesty and openness in online, video, audio, or face-to-face modes (Barab et al., 2001)

- Allowing as much time as possible for groups to share information that may not appear immediately related to the tasks at hand (Baptista & Sherman, 2018)

- Incentivizing collaboration and communication via grading, additional points, praise, and recognition for teacher-learners, special designations, or funding for teams of teacher-learners to present at a conference or to school leaders

- Being prepared to de-emphasize the product in favor of developing collaborative skills to permit group members to invest thoroughly in collaborative activities (Commonwealth of Learning, 2008)

- Engaging learners in collaborative planning and projects—these can range from parallel activities, sharing knowledge, or a joint project among teachers in various locations that requires a collaborative effort

15.3.5 Choose Technologies That Foster Communication and Collaboration

Human interaction is the key to community formation. Thus, the technology tools provided to learners must support a range of communication types and styles. Two-way audio and interactive video can bring teachers together around a common pursuit. In noninteractive forms of distance education—for example, broadcast radio or television or print-based learning—mobile phones, which allow for low-cost, text-based (SMS) and voice communication, are a successful technology tool used to foster the communication that is the lifeblood of a community.

Within a Web-based environment, learning that is organized around collaborative teams (versus self-study) can foster synchronous and asynchronous communication and multiple forms of interaction. *Asynchronous tools*,[4] such as e-mail, *Slack*, blogs, e-lists, bulletin boards, user groups, or threaded discussions in LMSs, can promote analysis, reflection, and critical thinking of innovative ideas and practices, allowing for deep and meaningful learning to occur (Barab et al., 2001, p. 135).

Synchronous tools, such as SMS, messaging services (e.g., *WhatsApp* or *Telegram*), Voice over IP tools (VoIP; e.g., *Skype* or *Facetime*), collaboration platforms (e.g., *Spinndle* and *Trello*), and Web conferencing tools (e.g., *Meet* and *Zoom*), where learners constantly "see" each other but work together in breakout rooms, can amplify personalized interaction. VoIP tools can allow for paired, small-group or large-group real-time discussions around specific teaching practices. Moreover, the uses of such tools for ongoing communication can provide the sort of "high-touch" contact and sense of belonging that may be

---

[4]We speak here of the design of the tool versus its actual use. Asynchronous tools can be used synchronously and vice versa.

absent in online courses (See Chapter 14) as well as the verbal immediacy and just-in-time assistance, mentioned in Chapter 13, that are critical elements in good online instruction and the coherence of online groups (Burns & Bodrogini, 2011).

The ongoing use of collaborative creation tools—such as *Diigo* for co-annotating readings, Google *Docs* for planning and co-creation, *Padlet* for brainstorming, and *Mahara* to co-construct action research projects—can result in the types of interaction with knowledge, practice, and online colleagues that Wenger has identified as critical to the formation of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Burns & Bodrogini, 2011; M. Hooker, personal communication, August 16, 2022; Laurillard, 2016). In addition to such uses, Figure 15.2 outlines a set of structured activities that can be organized in synchronous online interactions.

Using both asynchronous and synchronous tools for communication, teachers can create an automatic archived body of knowledge that may be accessed by others and communicate on an ongoing basis. Community formation can be further enhanced and expanded via collaborative projects, ongoing webinars, and online or virtual teaching and learning conferences. Whatever digital tools are being used, they should be intuitive and easy to use.

15.3.6 "Create a Community, Not a Classroom"

Establishing strong relationships with learners is critical for online communities as well as for online courses. In addition to the activities proposed in Figure 15.2, the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education suggests the following list of activities within synchronous online courses to promote online community formation:

- Ice-breaker activities, particularly for the first session, and/or self- or pair-based introductions

- Structuring opportunities to talk about personal contexts, session check-ins, and digital storytelling

---

**Figure 15.2
Online Community Activities**

Baptista & Sherman (2018) suggest the following activities during online community meetings. These activities deliberately invite participation by members.

Facilitator-led discussion. The facilitator selects a topic relevant to or suggested by members and provides in-depth resources for discussion.

Ask an expert. An internal or external expert shares information on a certain topic and then engages in a question-and-answer session with members.

Panel discussion. This is similar to "ask an expert," but with more opportunity to get a diversity of opinions.

Peer assist. Members tap the collective knowledge of the group to get recommendations or resources on the topics most relevant to them.

Shoot the moon. Members pose questions that may not have ready answers, and the group is given time and space to brainstorm on the issue.

Sprints. Members are brought together to accomplish a particular task in a short amount of time—for instance, creating a tool or guidelines that emerged from discussion (Baptista & Sherman, 2018, p. 2).

- Greeting participants by name as they enter the online classroom

- Checking in and chatting with learners who sign in early; similarly, course instructors can keep the webinar session "open" after it has officially ended to encourage and allow for social interaction on a personal level

- Using the whiteboard feature of Web conferencing tools such as *Zoom* or *Meet* to play games, such as *Pictionary*

- Using webinar platform polling features

- Holding small-group consultations or meetings with learners in breakout rooms

- Before class officially begins, asking participants to engage with the content by posting a warm-up question or idea to connect with their background knowledge on topics that will be discussed, putting responses in the chat, and using these written comments as launching points for the initial discussion (Brenneman & Karpman, 2020, as cited in Myung et al., 2020, pp. 18–19).

Within asynchronous courses, instructors also can pay careful attention to community formation by organizing learners into teams and incorporating opportunities for regularly scheduled meetings and peer feedback. In addition, individualized feedback on assignments, review of content through short videos, or voice and text messages are all ways that educators can provide asynchronous support around individual needs (Myung et al., 2020, p. 45).

15.4 Conclusion

Communities of practice offer several benefits to distance learning programs in general and to teachers in particular. First, they furnish the emotional, logistical, and procedural supports for their members in the pursuit of common interests and goals, transforming an undertaking from the individual to the shared realm. As seen in the previous chapter, this can help learners feel part of and valued by the group, and thus they are less likely to drop out of an online course.

Second, communities of practice can result in a purposeful educational network of professionals formed around a "joint enterprise" that serves as a rich source of teachers' collective learning and thus as a larger public good (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Wenger, 1998). Third, by connecting teacher-learners with colleagues whom they know or may not yet know, they make possible goal-oriented

knowledge generation and shared learning which is lubricated by the trust, mutual support, and open communication that form the basis of a community. These essential ingredients of community can be facilitated by technology-based opportunities to communicate, cooperate, co-learn, and co-create knowledge and ideas (M. Hooker, personal communication, August 16, 2022). Finally, communities of practice make public the private, embedded, and tacit professional knowledge of individuals within a group, so that knowledge generation is transformed into informed practice that can result in improved instructional change among teachers and within classrooms (Burns & Bodrogini, 2011; Burns & Dimock, 2007; Du Plessis & Muzaffar, 2010; Hord et al., 2006).

Although a powerful professional development tool and absolutely necessary to promote and sustain school-based change, online communities are hard to form and sustain. For that reason, online professional learning communities may be most effective when part of an overall, ongoing structured experience, such as an online program.

A final word: While this chapter has focused on primary and secondary educators, it is important to note that *teacher educators* also benefit from membership in professional learning communities. However, overloaded instructors' schedules, large numbers of student teachers, the absence of a supportive environment for professional development, and a lack of resources often impede the development of these professional communities among teacher educators. Like the teachers they prepare, distance and in-person instructors can benefit from the exchange of ideas, shared experimentation, and the wisdom and "counsel from experienced peers" (Du Plessis & Muzaffar, 2010, p. 1).

References

Academy of Singapore Teachers. (n.d.). *Professional learning communities*. Academy of Singapore Teachers. https://academyofsingaporeteachers.moe.edu.sg/professional-excellence/professional-learning-communities

Baptista, Z., & Sherman, T. (2018). *Virtual communities of practice guide.* Education Development Center.

Barab, S., Thomas, M., & Merrill, H. (2001). Online learning: From information dissemination to fostering collaboration. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research, 12*(1), 105–143.

Blitz, C. (2013). *Can online learning communities achieve the goals of traditional professional learning communities? What the literature says (REL 2013–003).* U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs

Blitz, C., & Schulman, R. (2016). *Measurement instruments for assessing the performance of professional learning communities (REL 2016–144).* U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED544210

British Council. (2015). *Technology for professional development: Access, interest and opportunity for teachers of English in South Asia.* British Council. https://www.britishcouncil.in/sites/default/files/digital_teachers_report_final_low_res.pdf

Burns, M. (2013, December). Staying or leaving? Designing for persistence in an online educator training program in Indonesia. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open and Distance Learning, 28*(2), 141–152. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2013.851023

Burns, M. (2016, November 22). *Five strategies to deepen student collaboration.* Edutopia. https://www.edutopia.org/article/5-strategies-deepen-student-collaboration-mary-burns

Burns, M. (in press). *Barriers and supports for technology integration: Views from teachers. background chapter prepared for the Global Education Monitoring report: Technology and education.* United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Burns, M., & Bodrogini, P. (2011). The wisdom of practice: Web 2.0 as a cognitive and community-building tool in Indonesia. In M. Thomas (Ed.), *Digital education* (pp. 167–193). Palgrave Macmillan.

Burns, M., & Dimock, K. (2007). *Technology as a catalyst for school communities: Beyond boxes and bandwidth.* Rowman & Littlefield.

Camburn, E., & Han, S. (2015). Infrastructure for teacher reflection and instructional change: An exploratory study. *Journal of Educational Change, 16*(4), 511–533. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-015-9252-6

Chiu, C., Chiu, C., & Chang, H. (2007). Examining the integrated influence of fairness and quality on learners' satisfaction and web-based learning continuance intention. *Information Systems Journal, 17*, 271–287. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2575.2007.00238.x

Commonwealth of Learning. (2008). *Education for a digital world: Advice, guidelines and effective practice from around the globe.* http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/52

Dikkers, A. (2018). Social interaction in K-12 online learning. In K. Kennedy & R. Ferdig (Eds.), *Handbook of research of K12 online and blended learning* (2nd ed.) (pp. 509-522). Carnegie Mellon University ETC Press. https://www.learntechlib.org/p/182993/

Dimock, K. V., Burns, M., Heath, M., & Burniske, J. (2001, December). *Applying technology to restructuring learning: How teachers use computers in technology assisted constructivist learning environments.* Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Doig, B., & Groves, S. (2011). Japanese lesson study: Teacher professional development through communities of inquiry. *Mathematics Teacher Education and Development, 13*(1), 77–93. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ960950.pdf

Donohoo, J. (2017). *Collective efficacy: How educators' beliefs impact student learning.* Corwin Press.

Du Plessis, J., & Muzaffar, I. (2010). *Professional learning communities in the teachers' college: A resource for teacher educators.* EQUIP 1. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524465.pdf

Dudley, P. (2019). *Lesson study: A handbook.* Lesson Study UK. https://lessonstudy.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/new-handbook-revisedMay14.pdf

Duncan-Howell, J. (2010). Teachers making connections: Online communities as a source of professional learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 41*(2), 324–340. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2009.00953.x

Gaible, E., & Burns, M. (2007). *Using technology to train teachers: Appropriate uses of ICT for teacher professional development in developing countries.* InfoDev │ World Bank. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/900291468324835987/pdf/396180infoDev01IN0TEACHERS01PUBLIC1.pdf

Girvan, C., Conneely, C., & Tangney, B. (2016). Extending experiential learning in teacher professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 58*, 129–139. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.04.009

Granovetter, M. (1973, May). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology, 78*(6), 1360–1368. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/225469

Gray, J., & DiLoreto, M. (2016). The effects of student engagement, student satisfaction, and perceived learning in online learning environments. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 11*(1). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1103654.pdf

Hennessy, S., D'Angelo, S., McIntyre, N., Koomar, S., Kreimeia, A., Cao, L., . . . Zubairi, A. (2022). Technology use for teacher professional development in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review. *Computers and Education Open, 3.* EdTech Hub. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeo.2022.100080

Hord, S., Rutherford , W. L., Huling-Austin, L., & Hall, G. (2006). *Taking charge of change.* Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Jackson, C., & Bruegmann, E. (2009, July). *Teaching students and teaching each other: The importance of peer learning for teachers.* National Bureau of Economic Research Working paper No. 15202. http://www.nber.org/papers/w15202

Jimenez-Silva, M., & Olson, K. (2012). A community of practice in teacher education: Insights and perceptions. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 24*(3), 335–348. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1000686.pdf

Johnson, D., Johnson, R., & Holubec, E. (1990). *Cooperation in the classroom.* Interaction Book Company.

Jordan, K., & Mitchell, J. (2020). *Messaging apps, SMS & social media: Rapid Evidence Review.* doi:10.5281/zenodo.4058181

Laurillard, D. (2016, April). The educational problem that MOOCs could solve: Professional development for teachers of disadvantaged students. *Research in Learning Technology, 24*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3402/rlt.v24.29369

Lloyd, M., & Duncan-Howell, J. (2010). Changing the metaphor: The potential of online communities in teacher professional development. In J. Lindberg & A. Oloffson (Eds.), *Online learning communities and teacher professional development: Methods for improved education delivery* (pp. 60-76). IGI Global.

Mendenhall, M., Bowden, L., Cha, J., Collas, S., Falk, D., French, S., . . . Skinner, M. (2017). *Strengthening teacher professional development: Local and global communities of practice in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya.* https://www.eccnetwork.net/resources/strengthening-teacher-professional-development

Myung, J., Gallagher, A., Cottingham, B., Gong, A., Kimner, H., Witte, J., . . . Hough, H. (2020). *Supporting learning in the COVID-19 context: Research to guide distance and blended instruction.* Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609208.pdf

Nistor, N., Schworm, S., & Werner, M. (2012). Online help-seeking in communities of practice: Modeling the acceptance of conceptual artifacts. *Computers & Education, 59*(2), 774–784. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.03.017

Organization of American States. (2022). *Organization of American States Inter-American Teachers Education Network.* https://www.oas.org/en/iten/default.asp

Perraton (Ed.), H. (1993). *Distance education for teacher training.* Routledge Press.

Perry, T., Findon, M., & Cordingley, P. (2021, August). Remote and blended teacher education: A rapid review. *Education Sciences, 11*(8), 453. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080453

Riel, M., & Polin, L. (2004). Common ground and critical differences in designing technical environments. In R. Barab, J. Kling, & H. Gray (Eds.), *Designing for virtual communities in the service of learning* (pp. 16-50). Cambridge University Press.

Riverin, S., & Stacey, E. (2008). Sustaining an online community of practice: A case study. *International Journal of E-Learning & Distance Education/Revue internationale du e-learning et la formation à distance, 22*(2).

South African Institute for Distance Education. (2005, November). Costing distance education and open learning in Sub-Saharan Africa: A survey of policy and practice. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open and Distance Learning, 20*(3), 211–225.

Teacher Leadership Consortium. (2011, March). *Teacher leader model standards teacher leadership exploratory consortium .* Educational Testing Service. https://www.ets.org/content/dam/ets-org/pdfs/patl/patl-teacher-leader-model-standards.pdf

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* Cambridge University Press.

Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2011). *Communities vs. teams.* http://wenger-trayner.com/resources/how-are-communities-of-practice-different-from-more-familiar-structures-like-teams-or-task-forces/

Zajonc, R. (1968). Attitudinal effects of mere exposure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 9*(2, Pt.2), 1–27.