

Communities of Practice: A glimpse into Delaware

By Maria Edgerton

“You cannot make people learn. You can only provide the right conditions for learning to happen.”

– Vince Growmon

It makes sense to me that peer learning teams are also referred to as “communities of practice.” Individuals who frequently come together can develop a sense of “community.” As the number of individuals and organizations focusing on communities of practice as a way to improve performance continues to grow, let me share with you how communities of practice have made an impact in Delaware.

First, let me clarify what I mean by “communities of practice.” Communities of practice (CoP) offer an alternative to traditional professional development. These are groups who interact regularly and have corresponding concerns or mutual passions. They engage in joint activities and discussions, offer a variety of types of support, and exchange information. Communities of practice are a great way to network with others, share best practices, and strengthen professional skills. And, CoPs aren’t limited to colleagues outside your organization. They can be formed inside your organization, too.

“I had no idea how beneficial the ELLI meetings would be. I enjoyed listening and talking to other professionals about the modules and discussing what was going on within each of our programs. It was so nice to be with people who could relate and truly understand the same daily challenges I face. The interactions with other directors were priceless. These meetings impacted me so much that I asked if anyone else in the group wished to continue our monthly meetings. Thankfully... 100% of the class agreed to continue to meet. I am looking forward to continuing my relationships with my professional peers!”

– Heather Wilson, *Director, Brandywine Valley Christian Preschool and Kindergarten*

During the last 18 months, I have facilitated more than 20 communities of practice. Delaware was one of 20 states that benefitted from Race to the Top/Early Learning Challenge Grant funding. The state formed the Early Learning Leadership Initiative (ELLI), which uses communities of practice as a framework. In partnership with the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, ELLI provides Delaware professionals with access to Aim4Excellence, an online National Director Credential. Participants complete their Aim4Excellence coursework online and then submit it for scoring. Cohorts throughout the state meet monthly and face-to-face for nine months to enhance the learning experience and achieve the credential, which is a requirement to reach the highest quality rating in Delaware’s quality rating and improvement system.

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In their evaluations of the program, many ELLI graduates say their favorite part of participating in the cohort was the monthly CoP gatherings. I have been privileged to witness professionals across the state share powerful professional experiences and meaningful personal stories. Many of the individuals in the 20 communities of practice have the same challenges. They brainstorm, strategize, and problem solve together. They share useful tools and resources. Their confidence grows, and they learn to stop second guessing their daily decisions. They celebrate together. They create connections with colleagues that will likely continue even after the group stops meeting.

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The results of [McCormick Center research](#) suggest that an informal low-intensity model, like a facilitated peer learning team, may be a cost-effective means for yielding moderate positive outcomes in the administrative practices in early care and education programs.

One of the most important facilitative strategies I have used to help enable successful CoPs is establishing “Common Courtesies” for the meetings. Many of these were derived from the ground rules found in [Inspiring Peak Performance: Commitment, Competence, Collaboration](#):

- Be on time.
- Silence your cell phone, and step out if you must take a call.
- Listen to others and be fully present.
- Respect each other and their opinion without judgement.
- Do not interrupt.
- Participate without monopolizing.
- Maintain confidentiality and when discussing situations, do not use names.
- Keep your questions and comments relevant to the topic.
- Be open, honest, and encouraging.

It’s worth the time investment to create a cohesive, cohort-style learning opportunity. How do you know whether you’re ready to form a community of practice? Check out the McCormick Center’s blog post, “Peer Learning Teams: Where to Begin,” to learn more about the first three steps she recommends: Determine team readiness, articulate a rationale, and decide on structure.

I’ve gained a number of insights from my experience facilitating the Delaware CoP teams. First, it takes time to build rapport and trust. You cannot force cohesiveness. A facilitator can, however, provide

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opportunities and activities to encourage relationship building. Second, every group has its own chemistry. There is nothing that can predict the climate of a unique group of professionals. Building a sense of community happens when participants hear from colleagues that they are not the only ones facing specific challenges. They realize that the challenges are not personal but universal, and it is OK to not have all of the answers. Finally, participants should feel like the meetings are productive. Keep the group on topic and focused on solutions.

If you're interested in learning more about communities of practice, check out these resources:

- [What is a Community of Practice and How Can We Support It?](#) by Christopher Hoadley
- [Inspiring Peak Performance: Commitment, Competence, and Collaboration](#) by Paula Jorde Bloom, Ann Hentschel, and Jill Bella
- [Making the Most of Meetings](#) by Paula Jorde Bloom
- [The Adaptive School: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups](#) by Robert J. Garmston and Bruce M. Wellman
- [Introduction to Communities of Practice: A brief overview of the concepts and its uses](#) by Etienne and Beverly Wegner-Trayner
- [Knowledge Sharing Toolkit: Communities of Practice](#)

Maria Edgerton works for the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University and is the Aim4Excellence Program Coordinator in Delaware. Over the past 18 months, she has facilitated 20 communities of practice groups with an average of 15 people in each cohort group. Maria has worked in the education field for more than 20 years. She holds a master's degree in education and bachelor's degree in psychology/sociology.

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