Supporting Learning Through a Community of Practice
In the simplest terms, a Community of Practice, or CoP, is a group of people who share an interest in something they do. And they learn how to do it better as they interact regularly with each other. In this episode, Fara Allen (Program Coordinator) and Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald (Program Specialist) discuss how a CoP provides a way for participants to work with their colleagues to offer support and share solutions and best practices.

Fara Allen: Hello and welcome to CETE Works, a podcast produced by the Curriculum and Training team at the Center on Education and Training for Employment—a translational research center on Ohio State's campus. We work where research meets reality. I'm your host, Fara Allen, a Program Coordinator at the Center. This series of podcasts focuses on workforce development and will feature discussions about preparing an organization for implementation or modification of a training program. To learn more about our work, you can visit our website CETE, that's C-E-T-E, dot O-S-U dot E-D-U. Today we're going to talk about communities of practice with Tricia Hughes Fitzgerald. Trisha is a program specialist at the center with over 20 years of experience who provides content expertise in the areas of curriculum and instruction with a focus on supporting educators in K through 12 career tech and post-secondary Trisha. Thank you for joining me today. For many of our listeners who have not been involved in a community of practice before. Can you start us off today by describing what it is?

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: Absolutely. And thank you for having me. A community of practice, in the simplest terms, is a group of people who share an interest in something they do. And they learn how to do it better as they interact regularly with each other. Also, a community of practice, I'll call it a COP, provides a way for members to ask questions of their colleague on share their best practices or their solutions to problems and provide each other with support.

Fara Allen: So, within this community, what role do you play and what is the purpose of that role?

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: My role in a community of practice has been to serve as the facilitator. And, as the facilitator, the most obvious role is that I guide participation to keep the discussion going. Additionally, though I change each meeting agenda, so what topics were the highest value for our participants and how best we could get insightful feedback about the program that the participants were involved in.

Fara Allen: What kind of support is needed to facilitate the program?

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: Obviously, you need participants, you need a facilitator, if we needed any kind of resources for our participants to use, we would provide those resources. As far as support goes it's a community of practice, so you want people to be comfortable and you want to have good discussion and you want to get good feedback and that doesn't just happen. You have to plan for that, but you don't want to make it look like you plan. You don't want to make it look like it's super formal so there's like a soft formality, as far as structure goes. And the COPs that I've facilitated, I start with participant expectations and exploration of what participation looks like. And a lot of the research on COPs, they'll talk about guidelines and rules. And, in dealing with adults, I don't like to be like, ok, here are the rules you have to follow. So, I call

them participant expectations, like I felt loaded with this is what I want to see, not like if you do this you're going to be in trouble. So, my expectations of those participants, I expect that they will, and this is in our powerpoint because it's always a visual. I expect that they're going to share their challenges and successes through insightful discussion of ideas and their own experiences. And they're going to be respectful and use appropriate language. Although depending on the group, appropriate language can vary, and you just have to get a feel for who you're working with. I expect they're going to agree to listen and respond to each other with open and constructive minds. And, lastly, that they're going to contribute to an atmosphere of problem solving because they're all in it together and they all want to learn how to do what they're doing better. And then, I also explain to them what participation looks like. So, not everybody feels comfortable sharing in a community of practice, and that's ok. I explain to my participants that there are ==really three zones of participation==. And, at the center of the group is a core group and they are intense participators, they talk a lot. And, around the core group is an active group and they're going to regularly participate, but they're not going to dominate the conversation. And then, around the active group is the peripheral group and they passively participate. I think for the peripheral group, it's really important to point out that it's ok to not be verbal. Just because somebody isn't talking, doesn't mean that they're not listening, taking it in, and reflecting on it to act on it later.

Fara Allen: A communities of practice sounds like something that I would have benefitted from in past positions. I think that having structure, like starting off each meeting with laying out expectation, sets a strong foundation for the program.

Fara Allen: Tricia does a great job of taking us behind the scenes of communities of practice, by sharing the facilitator's role at a high level and laying out expectations of participants to ensure there are productive conversations and learning taking place. Next, I asked Tricia to help us understand what some of the tools and resources are that she has used as part of a CoP in which she facilitated around an on-the-job training program.

Fara Allen: I've read some things about on the job training, rubrics, and surveys; are those tools always used or does it depend on the type of community of practice you are conducting? Also, how do you determine what support tools are best for each different group of participants?

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: Well, as far as the on-the-job training, the rubrics, and the manuals, we do use those resources during our communities of practice, but they are not necessarily resources that you are going to see in every community of practice. Again, a community of practice is a group of people that want to learn how to do what they're doing better. In one specific COP, we had managers as mentors, and the goal of the program was to use field technicians as mentors for either new technicians or technicians who assess below desirable level within their field. And I ran two separate COPs, I worked with the managers of the mentors in one COP, and I worked with the mentors in another COP. The role of the mentors was to teach their mentees how to do the tasks of the job. How to replace a doorknob or how to install an electrical outlet. These were facilities maintenance technicians at Ohio State ad the program was designed to upscale the mentors, so that they could teach their mentees how do these tasks. And, as part of that on-the-job training, we had manuals and rubrics that the mentors use. So, the mentors had a mentor manual, and the mentees had a mentee manual, with the same information. They would walk through the steps, and the mentors would teach the mentees how

to do it. And then the mentor would back off and let the mentee try. And then, eventually, the mentee felt ready to be assessed, they would use a rubric to grade how well they were doing each part of steps. So, we use those tools a lot in a community of practice. But I do think it's important if you are going to organize and run a community of practice, whatever support your participants need, you need to bring that to the COP. We never ask participants to provide their own materials, we supply the necessary supports.

Fara Allen: Communities of practice can exist in a variety of industries, fields, and spaces. As an example, next Tricia shares another experience where she utilized a community of practice, this time not within an employment space, but rather in the field of adult education.

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: So really a community of practice can be used in any field because it's just a group of people who want to get better at doing what they do. Another COP that I've worked with is program directors with Ohio's adult education program, in which they were basically asked to pick an area in which they felt needed attention, such as recruitment or retention of students. Depending on the area that the program director picked, there were assigned with a community of practice for their area. They met once a month to discuss challenges and successes and to problem solve with each other. And it worked. They were able to speak up and say hey, I'm having a problem with this issue in my program, and then somebody would say, you know what I had that problem, too, and here's what I did about it. And the personal goal is great – I'm going to go back to my program and I'm going to try it. Next month, come back to the meeting and say, you know, I tried that and I'm seeing improvement. Who better to learn from than the people doing the job right?

Fara Allen: For those of you listening, I think we can all agree there is great value in having communities of practice as a technique that can contribute to the learning we desire to take place in a training or professional development program. Next what I wanted to know was how do we know if they are effective?

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: We have formal evaluation done by our assessment team. You can do a formal evaluation. You always want to do a formal evaluation, but then informally - and this might be how I measure success from my years in the classroom – informally is how engaged people are. So, if their arms are crossed if they're looking at their smartphone, if they're working on something else, if they're snoring. That's the kiss of death. That's not good if they're talking and they're asking a question, if they're giving their opinions, if they're raising a finder to indicate that they get to go next. Lastly, if I crack a joke and they laugh, that's how I know and I'm being successful. So informally, I just look at body language. I look at their level of interest. I look at how they're communicating with me and receiving me.

Fara Allen: I think you answered my next question, because I was thinking about how different levels of participation and perspectives impact the success of a program. And I think that you just described it, you're going to have those varying levels of participation and everyone has a different perspective that they bring. How do you set boundaries if you find that there is too much of a variance in participation or perspectives?

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: Sure, one of the participant expectations is use respectful language and if someone slips up, I remind them of the participant expectations, and point out specifics if I

need to, and they're cool with it. Variety is the spice of life. In a community of practice, you're going to have people performing their job at different levels. And sometimes it can get heated, and if that happens, we take a break. So, I think being a teacher for so long and now also being a parent, I can pretty much recognize if things are going to go downhill, and that's when I step in and say, you know what, that is a really good point that you just made, nobody's right, nobody's wrong, these are just opinions, we're having a discussion, and we're all adults, so you can kind of take it down a little bit. Every once in a while, there is silence and people don't like silence, and you really have to be OK with it. And, you know when I was teaching, it was called wait time. I'd ask the question to the class, and nobody would answer; a lot of people would jump in and say Ok well we'll move on to the next thing. They don't like silence. But, in a community of practice where you want people to engage in discussion, put the prompt out there, and then just wait.

Fara Allen: That's one reason that the role of the facilitator is so important. You have to recognize those cues, know how to handle them, and how to respond.

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: Yep. Some people will become uncomfortable, and they'll start talking.

Fara Allen: The pandemic has obviously impacted everyone in almost every aspect of our lives – so, I was curious to hear from Tricia how she has seen communities of practice be impacted and if it is still possible to have effective CoPs during this time…

Fara Allen: I can imagine all of this in a setting in a room with a group of people in-person. But how has the community of practice program itself been affected by the pandemic. How has it changed the way it's conducted and facilitated? How can organizations be creative right now during the pandemic when maybe it's not so easy.

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: That is such a good question. When we did the communities in of practice with the adult education program directors a couple of years ago, they were conference calls. And that was really, really, really hard. I mean, there were times when it was like pulling teeth because we weren't used to it. So, I thought for the longest time that everything had to be face-to-face, you have to teach face-to-face, Communities of practice have to be face-to-face, doctor's appointments are face-to-face. No way that those events can be virtual. And, then, overnight, it was like, oh hey, by the way, everything has to be virtual. And, you know what, there was a steep learning curve for everybody. We were scheduled to conduct our communities of practice for the Skilled Trades program in March 2020. We had to pause it. Had we gone ahead with that, I think it would have been a disaster because I was experiencing this huge learning curve of how to do things virtually. I mean, I was like what do I do, how do I use new methods. So, I can't imagine having had a communities of practice in March. Today, I can do it easily, I'm very comfortable with doing things virtually now. I think a lot of us are. And I think we could pick up right where we left from. As far as organizations getting creative, now that I've had time to adjust to designing and delivering in a virtual world, and now that I am comfortable with doing things in a virtual world, I think it's a huge benefit for organizations to reimagine what their face-to-face operations do and could look like in a virtual world. Don't stop doing them because they're important. Just imagine what they're going to look like next. Additionally, for me, I work from home, I've always worked from home for Ohio State. But, when we have scheduled communities of practice sessions, I drive one hour to get to the office, so

that's two hours of travel time. Participants would have to leave their jobs and come to our center for the sessions, so they invest in travel time, as well. But, now doing things virtually, we've eliminated the travel time and cost associated with it, and participation is just a few clicks away. You know, reimagining tings virtually is not quite as scary as you might think. Conducting things virtually, we've had higher levels of participation and once everyone is comfortable in a virtual environment, you're good to go.

Fara Allen: Lastly, I was curious to hear Tricia's thoughts on how important she thinks the integration of a communities of practice within a training program was. Here is what she had to say.

Fara Allen: When is the ideal time for an organization to implement a community of practice?

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: You know, you don't want to launch a new training program and then one year later start to get feedback and realize that the rubric you gave them on day one is useless, and they've been using stacks of rubrics as doorstops. You want to get that feedback right away. If an organization is implementing a new training program and they're going to be training people, the people that are being trained should be in a community of practice, to give feedback on how it's going, to discuss challenges, how to solve problems, get advice. Then, the people running the training program get that feedback.

Fara Allen: I learned a lot today and I hope all of our listeners did, too. Is there anything else that you'd like for us to know today?

Tricia Hughes-Fitzgerald: I think communities of practice are great. Every time I facilitate one, I evaluate more and more and more. And I learn how to do it better. I think they are adaptable and transferable. Anytime you have a group of people that want to learn how to do something better, a community of practice is the way to go. I think in some areas it is underutilized. I think a lot of people look at them as being effective within education, but I truly think that it can be learned and if implemented correctly can be extremely useful. I love them!

Fara Allen: Thank you so much, I appreciate your time.

Fara Allen: Thank you for taking the time to listen today! We hope you enjoyed it and will share with your friends! If you'd like more information on this topic, you can contact us at go.osu.edu/OhioState4Work. See our description for details. Be well and bye for now!