

FACE Peace Design Brief #1: Communities of Practice On/Offline

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The COVID-19 pandemic upended the peacebuilding community. In-person gatherings designed to facilitate trust, open communication, and mutual understanding suddenly shifted to online spaces. The hasty change to virtual gathering generated substantial frustration and confusion but prompted meaningful questions about inclusion, justice and efficacy in our old ways of working.

The FACE Peace Initiative at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice intends to help peacebuilders answer questions about in-person and online collaboration with intention and care. This design brief combines desk research on best practices from other fields with observation of peacebuilding organizations to identify key debates and concerns and provide insight into how to navigate trade-offs between in-person and distanced peacebuilding activities and events.

Peacebuilding organizations often attempt to gather members of the field into “communities of practice” (“CoPs”), which intend to increase skills and knowledge among members through long-term information-sharing and reciprocal mentorship. Facilitators of practice communities in peacebuilding and other fields frequently complain that the community falls moribund over time.

This FACE Peace design brief considers the question of practice community success from the perspective of hybrid work and the tensions peacebuilders have come to feel between digital and in-person interactions in a truly global field.

What does in-person interaction between practice community members accomplish? When are these benefits essential for success? When are they simply “nice to have”? What are the best ways to recreate the benefits of in-person meetings at a distance? Are there benefits only distanced work can provide?

Answers depend in part on the goals, constraints and characteristics of the practice community. This design brief offers insights on two related questions. First, how should the facilitators of practice communities decide what happens in person and what happens at a distance? Second, how can facilitators administer the in-person and online aspects of their practice communities to maximum effect?

The full brief offers dozens of suggestions on making design decisions for your practice community. Three themes stand out:

Practice communities operate on trust. Members join and contribute primarily because they trust that the participation of other members will benefit them. Trust is easier to build in person, but many peacebuilding practice communities benefit from diverse memberships that cannot meet in person.

Social bonding between members delivers numerous positive results for practice communities. Not only do CoP members with social ties trust each other more, but they also tend to move the community in useful directions without much direction from facilitators. Social bonding is best done in person, but we offer research-based solutions for distanced groups and tips for using partially in-person gatherings to maximum effect.

Global practice communities benefit from having a regionally diverse membership, but having members around the world introduces inclusion problems whether the group meets in person or online. We offer advice on making practice community events as inclusive as possible, whether physical or digital.

Readers may also wish to get an intuitive view of how to decide whether a particular CoP should focus on in-person or distanced engagement. Figure 1, below, lists some central CoP characteristics and how they weigh on both the online/in-person and the synchronous/asynchronous decision.

More Distanced and Asynchronous Events

- Highly diverse membership
- Strong facilitators or network champions
- Community subject is technical and well-defined

More Synchronous and In-Person Events

- High reliance on members for content contribution
- Emotional support is primary purpose of community

Figure 1: Top-Line Considerations for Distanced or In-Person CoPs

The balance of this design brief goes into greater detail on these themes and the other issues they implicate. No reader should expect to implement all of the suggestions below; rather, it is most useful to see the brief as an opportunity to become more acquainted with practice communities and the give-and-take of facilitating them in the digital age.



I. Introduction

A. Communities of Practice

Communities of practice (“CoPs”) gather together individuals with an interest in building skills and knowledge applicable to a common task. They are “groups of people who come together to learn from one another.”¹ As one peacebuilder who participated in a FACE Peace event remarked, “I see people refer to all kinds of networks as ‘practice communities,’ but to me it’s not a practice community unless the point is to improve your practice.”

Practice communities are voluntary and allow members to leave without penalty.² Members of CoPs typically share a base level of knowledge about the practice in question and can ask questions and evaluate content within the CoP using a similar professional language.³ They share similar goals in terms of blending and synthesizing the information and mentorship the community offers to come up with better solutions, which they re-share with the group.⁴

CoPs vary enormously in other ways, including the size and diversity of their membership and the resources at their disposal. While some CoPs self-organize, institutions can create a vision, a motivation and a system in which the “structured spontaneity” of practice communities can thrive.⁵ This design brief considers the natural variation within practice communities and makes suggestions tailored to specific types of programs. Furthermore, this design brief focuses on the creation and facilitation of CoPs whose primary purpose is improving humanitarian development practice.

Today, the majority of communities of practice exist at least partly online, thanks to powerful internet applications that make archiving and displaying the practice community’s content easy. This design brief therefore assumes that CoP facilitators will choose, at the minimum, to host content on an internal website or through a common blogging platform such as WordPress. It also discusses the potentials offered by more complete hosting sites.

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- 1 Anne Bourhis and Line Dubé, “Structuring Spontaneity’: Investigating the Impact of Management Practices on the Success of Virtual Communities of Practice,” *Journal of Information Science* 36, no. 2 (2010): 176.
 - 2 Richard P. Bagozzi and Utpal M. Dholakia, “Intentional Social Action in Virtual Communities,” *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 16, no. 2 (2002): 3.
 - 3 Gary Burnett, “Information Exchange in Virtual Communities: A Typology,” *Information Research* 5, no. 4 (2000).
 - 4 Irene Y. L. Chen, “The Factors Influencing Members’ Continuance Intentions in Professional Virtual Communities—A Longitudinal Study,” *Journal of Information Science* 33, no. 4 (2007): 456.
 - 5 John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, “Structure and Spontaneity: Knowledge and Organization,” in *Managing Industrial Knowledge: Creation, Transfer and Utilization*, ed. Ikujiro Nonaka and David J. Teece (London: Sage, 2001), 44–67.

B. What Makes a Successful Community?

Successful communities of practice offer members easy access to useful information within a community where the members feel a sense of belonging.⁶ CoPs that meet these criteria are most likely to have “satisfied” members who also tend to contribute.⁷ The future participation of CoP members is a key driver of both useful content creation and a pleasant sense of community. This brief offers CoP design strategies that make it easier to provide potential members with ease of access, a sense of community, and useful information.

The number of design decisions that affect access, information, and belonging are dizzying. (Readers can see a visual, schematic layout of these decisions and their effects in Appendix A.) Amid all the research on these factors of CoP success, three important themes stand out.

First, members understand that creating knowledge for their CoP is time intensive and worry that they may put in more than they get out. Quite a bit of research focuses on solving this “free rider” problem as essential to the generation of useful information and, secondarily, as necessary to building a trusting community.

Building trust can be hard, especially in larger and more distanced communities. Members see each other as rows of gray boxes with more and less familiar organizations and titles. Peacebuilding CoPs thus benefit from the best strategies possible for building trust at a distance and might consider using strategic face-to-face meetings to build up key connections and networks within the CoP.

Second, research and practice in CoPs across fields has demonstrated that encouraging members to take social time together has multiple important benefits for knowledge co-creation and community feeling. Like trust-building, social bonding occurs more readily in person. Still, changing culture about distanced work and new technologies offers promising options for distanced practice communities, and careful design can ensure that shorter in-person meetings have a lasting effect.

Finally, facilitators want to understand how to use online applications to make their practice communities more vibrant and accessible. Here, facilitators often face a trade-off between the “as close to in-person as possible” events and engaging, multi-media community content, on the one hand, and accessibility of the content for members in far-flung time zones with poor internet infrastructure, on the other.

6 Thomas W. Gruen, John O. Summers, and Frank Acito, “Relationship Marketing Activities, Commitment, and Membership Behaviors in Professional Associations,” *Journal of Marketing* 64, no. 3 (2000): 34-49.

7 Christy M. K. Cheung, Matthew K. O. Lee, and Zach W. Y. Lee, “Understanding the Continuance Intention of Knowledge Sharing in Online Communities of Practice through the Post-Knowledge-Sharing Evaluation Processes,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 64, no. 7 (2013): 1357-1374.

For example, text-only CoPs are asynchronous and require little in terms of internet bandwidth, making them accessible to potential members in poorer areas and time zones out of sync with London or Washington, DC. Yet trust and belonging both benefit from face time (even if it happens on FaceTime).

Readers looking to quick-start a successful CoP can ask themselves three questions:

1. Will my potential members trust that the effort they put into building our CoP will be repaid with useful information from others?
2. Will my members have adequate opportunities to get to know each other outside the boundaries of our shared practice?
3. Are all members of my CoP able to make full use of the opportunities that exist to generate, share and receive useful content?

Each of these themes is highlighted prominently in the sections below. Appendix A also highlights these themes in color.

C. Organization of the Design Brief

Each section of the design brief below considers one of the direct determinants of CoP success and member satisfaction. Section II tackles the need to produce useful information, with an emphasis on co-production. This section also details the issue of “free rider” problems in practice communities. Section III explores how to create a community with an organic sense of belonging. It also considers the role of social connection in generating CoP success. Section IV considers accessibility issues, and points out where design choices that generate useful content and community feeling may reduce access. Section V offers a concluding summary.



II. Useful Content

Few readers will be surprised to hear that practice communities function better when they provide useful content for their members to consume. Information-sharing is the stated reason for facilitating a practice community! Yet interviews of peacebuilding professionals who participate in all roles of CoPs suggest that practice communities often wither due to lack of content creation. How to motivate the production of useful content? At least two ways stand out: member participation in content creation and content moderation and curation attuned to member needs.

A. Member Participation in Content Creation

Studies of CoPs consistently demonstrate that participant satisfaction and future participation in a CoP are both tied to the amount of relevant content the CoP generates.⁸ But who contributes and why?

This section is most relevant for practice communities that expect members to contribute content. In many cases, facilitators of practice communities prefer to generate all community content themselves (see, for example, Box 1's case study of the Alliance for Peacebuilding's "Digital Peacebuilding Community of Practice" below). In other cases, the CoP exists primarily to encourage sharing between members. In these cases, developing participation is plainly vital.

CoP members participate for a variety of reasons. Some feel a sense of altruism to others coming up in their field; others have high confidence in their own knowledge and feel rewarded when others see them as experts. Some share when they feel kinship with the community, especially when they view themselves as linking other members of the CoP together.

CoPs can also encourage participation by urging members to take on group content creation projects as a way to network and develop professional skills. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, CoPs can foster a sense of trust and social capital that alleviates concerns about free-riding.

This section begins with, and spends the greatest amount of time considering, CoP design choices that facilitate trust. We discuss trust-building primarily in terms of incentivizing participation, and by extension content creation, but note that trust is useful for other purposes, as well (see Appendix A). After considering trust, the section turns to the members' intrinsic motivations and to the structure of the CoP members' network. Each section offers solutions for building vibrant participation.

8 E.g., Uwe Matzat, "Do Blended Virtual Learning Communities Enhance Teachers' Professional Development More than Purely Virtual Ones? A Large Scale Empirical Comparison," *Computers & Education* 60, no. 1 (2013): 40-51; Janet Macdonald and Barbara Poniatowska, "Designing the Professional Development of Staff for Teaching Online: An OU (UK) Case Study," *Distance Education* 32, no. 1 (2011): 119-134. Relevance is key: Members often withdraw from practice communities that over-communicate! Sanna Talja, Reijo Savolainen, and Hanni Maula, "Field Differences in the Use and Perceived Usefulness of Scholarly Mailing Lists," *Information Research: An International Electronic Journal* 10, no. 1 (2004), paper 200.

1. *Free-Riding and Trust in Practice Communities*⁹

Peacebuilding CoPs take pride in connecting participants with different lived experiences, and the value of the CoP often relies on **participants themselves** providing the perspectives that enrich the experience of other members. Trust in CoPs “is the glue that binds the members of a community to act in [a] sharing manner... without trust, members would hoard their knowledge and experience and would not go through the trouble of sharing with or learning from others.”¹⁰

Relying on participant contribution comes with risks. CoP participants in other fields, such as health, education and law enforcement, often hold back from providing content out of concern that others in the community will “free-ride.”¹¹ In the context of CoPs, “free-riding is the tendency of members to withhold information and let others incur contribution costs.”¹² The practice of free-riding in CoPs and other information-sharing communities is extremely common; nearly everyone understands what it means to be a “lurker.”¹³

Building trust is therefore essential to building a successful practice community.

Credible evidence suggests that in-person interaction builds more trusting relationships more quickly than interaction online. A 2009 survey of management executives showed that 84 percent preferred in-person meetings for relationship-building;¹⁴ in a Harvard Business Review survey from the same year, respondents vastly preferred in-person meetings for maintaining key relationships.¹⁵ In a study of bargaining through email, allowing participants to engage in a “get acquainted” telephone call before the bargaining session increased chances of reaching an agreement by 50 percent.¹⁶

Practice communities that meet in person frequently develop trust faster, but such structures will rarely work in the peacebuilding field, where relevant community members live all over the world.

⁹ Appendix A highlights in red the design choices facilitators can make to increase participation by building trust and avoiding the free rider problem.

¹⁰ Maish Nichani and David Hung, “Can a Community of Practice Exist Online?” *Educational Technology* (2002): 51.

¹¹ Sasha A. Barab, James G. MaKinster, and Rebecca Scheckler, “Designing System Dualities: Characterizing a Web-Supported Professional Development Community,” *The Information Society* 19, no. 3 (2003): 237-256; Rob Kling and Christina Courtright, “Group Behavior and Learning in Electronic Forums: A Sociotechnical Approach,” *The Information Society* 19, no. 3 (2003): 221-235; Catherine M. Ridings, David Gefen, and Bay Arinze, “Some Antecedents and Effects of Trust in Virtual Communities,” *The Journal of Strategic Information Systems* 11, no. 3-4 (2002): 271-295.

¹² Uwe Matzat, “Reducing Problems of Sociability in Online Communities: Integrating Online Communication with Offline Interaction,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 8 (2010): 1172.

¹³ Gary Burnett, “Information Exchange in Virtual Communities: A Typology,” *Information Research* 5, no. 4 (2000).

¹⁴ Forbes, “Business Meetings: The Case for Face-to-Face,” *Forbes Insights* (2009), https://images.forbes.com/forbesinsights/StudyPDFs/Business_Meetings_FaceToFace.pdf.

¹⁵ Harvard Business Review, “Managing Across Distance in Today’s Economic Climate: The Value of Face-to-Face Communication,” *Harvard Business Review Analytic Services Report* (2009).

¹⁶ Janice Nadler, Leigh Thompson, and Michael Morris, “Schmooze or Lose: The Effects of Rapport and Gender in Email Negotiations,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management, Chicago, IL, 1999.

Facilitators of peacebuilding CoPs are thus left with two major strategies: building trust within a distanced or hybrid CoP, and rewarding members that provide content with creative payments to jump-start productivity. A few suggestions:

Hybrid communities and off-line networks: Practice communities embedded in off-line networks face fewer trust issues than those that are fully distanced.¹⁷ CoPs with financial resources should consider hosting in-person meetings for key members, who can in turn inspire participation from other members.

Facilitators should also consider recruiting members who already know one another, and whose professional status and relationships incentivize them against free-riding in front of their colleagues. See **Nomination of CoP “leadership”** below.

Online bonding events: Participants with good social bonds to other participants are more likely to contribute to the CoP, which drives up overall rates of contribution.¹⁸ Facilitators could plan opportunities for participants to socialize or otherwise deepen their bonds outside the CoP. Randomized “coffee dates” between members or facilitated conversations based upon region or area of expertise can prompt an organic sense of community in your community. Larger CoPs will find sustaining a sense of social bonding more difficult.¹⁹

Because social bonding is important for trust and participation, and for a variety of other outcomes, the design brief expands on these ideas substantially in Section III below.

Nomination of CoP “leadership”: Facilitators may wish to identify senior members of the field within the CoP and ask them to champion the CoP by discussing its potential value or by reaching out to members that contribute frequently. Access to a respected senior member of the field creates a side benefit for active junior members, whose participation may convince others that participation in the CoP will pay dividends. Leaders themselves may be afforded a title or status in lieu of money.²⁰

Intensive facilitation and rewards: Facilitators might offer special access or professional rewards to members that contribute high-quality content to the community.²¹ In one FACE Peace interview, a CoP facilitator noted her organization hosts a roundtable each year with high-level thinkers in the field: “We invite some of our most active for a half-an-hour Q&A after the roundtable is over to reward them for contributing to the community.”

17 Matzat, “Reducing Problems of Sociability,” 1170-1193, *supra*, fn. 12.

18 Claxus, “Building a Professional Community,” Claxus, October 12, 2009, <https://claxus.com/articles/building-a-professional-community/>; Matzat, “Do Blended Virtual Learning Communities,” *supra*, fn. 8.

19 Gruen, et al., “Relationship Marketing Activities,” *supra*, fn. 6; Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William C. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2002).

20 Linda C. Li, Jeremy M. Grimshaw, Camilla Nielsen, Maria Judd, Peter C. Coyte, and Ian D. Graham, “Evolution of Wenger’s Concept of Community of Practice,” *Implementation Science* 4, no. 1 (2009): 6.

21 Wenger, et al., *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, *supra*, fn. 19.

Payments: Facilitators could use extra funds to solicit content for the CoP, provide incentives to leaders for their time, or facilitate regional in-person social hours or distanced social hours with prizes.²²

Reputational benefits and fairness: Members of practice communities have opportunities to distinguish themselves among their peers through contributions. CoP facilitators can support this by highlighting content creation and creators that provide exceptional service to the community.²³

Members considering making contributions to CoPs are likely to form opinions about whether the recognition is distributed fairly. In particular, CoP members want the process of doling out rewards to be transparent and fair.²⁴ In small CoPs, members often concur on who the community's all-stars are. In larger CoPs, some members or cliques of members feel ignored. Moderation and curation policies are thus more important here.

The majority of the suggestions above can be implemented in fully distanced CoPs to build trust among the membership and ensure that participants will contribute. The CoPs studied in the citations above, however, run the spectrum from hybrid to distanced, suggesting that facilitators can benefit from using a mix of these strategies in any practice community.

2. *Intrinsic Rewards: Self-Efficacy and Altruism*

CoP members also contribute for personal reasons, including the joy of feeling mastery over some portion of the CoP's agenda²⁵ or altruism toward other members²⁶ (often because the contributing member wishes to spare some effort or pain for others).

Self-efficacy typically involves a person's belief that their knowledge can help to solve job-related problems or make a difference to their organization. If people feel that they lack useful knowledge, they may decline to contribute. Increasing the self-efficacy of CoP members makes double sense for community facilitators: Their members feel more professionally empowered and are more likely to contribute to the CoP.

22 Uwe Matzat, "The Embeddedness of Academic Online Groups in Offline Social Networks: Reputation Gain as a Stimulus for Online Discussion Participation?" *International Sociology* 24, no. 1 (2009): 63-92; Claxus, "Building a Professional Community," *supra*, fn. 18.

23 Molly McLure Wasko and Samer Faraj, "Why Should I Share? Examining Social Capital and Knowledge Contribution in Electronic Networks of Practice," *MIS Quarterly* (2005): 35-57; Cheung, et al., "Understanding the Continuance Intention," *supra*, fn. 7.

24 Yu-Hui Fang and Chao-Min Chiu, "In Justice We Trust: Exploring Knowledge-Sharing Continuance Intentions in Virtual Communities of Practice," *Computers in Human Behavior* 26, no. 2 (2010): 235-246.

25 A feeling often referred to as "self-efficacy." Cheung, et al., "Understanding the Continuance Intention," *supra*, fn. 7; and Shan Liu, Wenyi Xiao, Chao Fang, Xing Zhang, and Jiabao Lin, "Social Support, Belongingness, and Value Co-Creation Behaviors in Online Health Communities," *Telematics and Informatics* 50 (2020): 101398.

26 Sirkka L. Jarvenpaa and D. Sandy Staples, "The Use of Collaborative Electronic Media for Information Sharing: An Exploratory Study of Determinants," *The Journal of Strategic Information Systems* 9, no. 2-3 (2000): 129-154; and Atreyi Kankanhalli, Bernard C. Y. Tan, and Kwok-Kee Wei, "Contributing Knowledge to Electronic Knowledge Repositories: An Empirical Investigation," *MIS Quarterly* (2005): 113-143.

CoP managers can increase self-efficacy among members with relatively simple initiatives that are appropriate to the full range of distanced to in-person communities:

Self-reflection and evaluation: CoPs can offer members opportunities to privately reflect on their skills and skill-building through the CoP. A study of teachers showed that CoP members with access to a private journal on the CoP’s website, which featured prompts related to CoP programming, increased the self-efficacy of members compared to those without journal access.²⁷

Quality programming: Perhaps intuitively, actually teaching CoP members relevant skills increases their perception of their abilities and, in turn, increases participation.²⁸ CoP facilitators can maximize the effect of their early content on member participation by taking surveys of members and creating content that addresses the gaps they identify in their skillset.

Altruism, a person’s sense of duty to or satisfaction from helping others, is more difficult to engineer. Prior studies of CoPs show that trusting members and members of socially bonded CoPs also feel more responsibility to contribute.²⁹ CoP facilitators might therefore consider that investments in trust-building (see section above) or social belonging (see section below) pay double dividends.

3. Network Structure

CoP members are also incentivized to contribute when they feel like connectors within the CoP network. That is, the more central an individual feels within the group, the more likely they are to take responsibility for producing content.³⁰ Similarly, CoP members contribute more when they are asked to work together.³¹

To the extent that CoP facilitators delegate management and other tasks to members, they can influence the extent to which members feel connected to one another. Without making the CoP too bureaucratic, CoP facilitators can assign groups of members small tasks and the responsibility to report the results to the members of other task groups. The leaders of the teams will feel more central to, and greater ownership in, the CoP. They will also provide tangible examples of network championship and leadership, which benefits trust-building (see section above).

27 Didem Inel Ekici, “Development of Pre-Service Teachers’ Teaching Self-Efficacy Beliefs through an Online Community of Practice,” *Asia Pacific Education Review* 19 (2018): 27-40.

28 Todd R. Kelley, J. Geoffery Knowles, Jeffrey D. Holland, and Jung Han, “Increasing High School Teachers Self-Efficacy for Integrated STEM Instruction through a Collaborative Community of Practice,” *International Journal of STEM Education* 7 (2020): 1-13.

29 Fang and Chiu, “In Justice We Trust,” *supra*, fn. 24.

30 Chen, “The Factors Influencing,” 456, *supra*, fn. 4; Caroline Haythornthwaite, “A Social Network Study of the Growth of Community among Distance Learners,” *Information Research* 4, no. 1 (1998).

31 Jarvenpaa and Sandy Staples, “The Use of Collaborative Electronic Media,” *supra*, fn. 26; Kankanhalli, et al., “Contributing Knowledge to Electronic Knowledge Repositories,” *supra*, fn. 26.

Team responsibility for content benefits participation in another important way. CoP members will feel responsibility to the individuals on their team. Free-riding is no longer free or unnoticed.

Larger CoPs are likely to fracture into subgroups.³² Facilitators can lean into this by creating groups that will facilitate creativity within the group and then encouraging participation among and between the groups. Facilitators can also design rewards and recognition schemes to fit the goals and resources of the membership.

Building trust, encouraging feelings of self-efficacy, and strategically shaping the CoP network can all encourage participation in a range of practice communities. Facilitators have the opportunity to mix and match these strategies in ways appropriate for the community's goals and resources.

For example, a global practice community, distanced by necessity but with resources for occasional in-person meetings, might use those meetings to reward frequent contributors or high-quality content. These meetings can solidify personal and social bonds between participants, who go on to become coordinating members and network champions. Facilitators without the resources for global, in-person meetings might instead sponsor regional meet-ups and delegate responsibility to local coordinating members and network champions, which facilitates strong local networks that build back up to the global community.

B. Content Moderation and Curation to Suit Member Needs

Once a CoP enjoys a steady stream of content, ideally produced by interactive groups of members, facilitators will have to focus on moderating which content appears to members and how. This design brief refers to the combination of moderation and curation policy as “content strategy” or “content management.”

This section is most applicable to hybrid or distanced CoPs that intend to publish or store past content on the web. Creating a community website or blog offers substantial advantages, including increasing the ability of members to access and share content and of facilitators to provide more context and content options to members.

In order for the CoP to be useful, facilitators need to match both the quality and quantity of content to members' expectations. Moderation focuses on generating productive rules for communication between members of the CoP in CoP spaces. Curation refers to the art of promoting and contextualizing content that members will find useful. Moderation and curation serve the twin purposes of protecting the community from anti-social content and promoting the community's practice goals.

32 Wenger, et al., *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, supra, fn. 19.

Mini Case Study: Alliance for Peacebuilding’s “Digital Peacebuilding Community of Practice”

Some CoPs seek to accomplish nothing more than creating a platform through which members can occasionally share ideas. For example, Alliance for Peacebuilding’s “Digital Peacebuilding Community of Practice”³³ gathers members once a month for a seminar-style presentation about a topic related to communication technology and peace. AfP staff solicit members for contributions and schedule and host the seminar through Zoom.

AfP’s content curation strategy can be quite simple because the practice community’s goal does not require substantial member participation to achieve. In part due to its position in the peacebuilding field and the strong management role in the CoP taken by AfP’s staff, members trust that the seminars will provide a thoughtful look at an important issue, and contributors trust that there will be a large and interested enough audience to generate some exposure for the contributor and helpful questions and critique about the project.

As a result, AfP’s practice community largely delivers on its goal of “provid[ing] capacity building webinars on particular issues to advance skills in digital communication strategies within peacebuilding organizations” with limited interaction and content production from the modal member.

Curation and moderation policies take time and resources to administer. How much does the facilitator need to do? The effects of particular curation and moderation policies on member satisfaction are poorly understood, but professional digital curators tend to agree that the *intensity* of moderation and curation policy should mirror the size of the community and the extent to which the facilitators plan to rely on members for content.

Seminar model CoPs typify one combination of membership size and role (see box above). These CoPs tend to select marquee content to present to a more-or-less passive audience, which re-convenes when the CoP facilitator advertises another content event.

Seminar CoPs can deliver high-quality content with minimal content strategy. This assures a high-quality professional development experience but provides few of the benefits associated with socially bonded memberships, such as professional networking and mentorship.

Some CoPs engage very small membership communities, usually with members that know each other and have professional relationships outside the CoP. Content management in

³³ “Digital Peacebuilding,” Alliance for Peacebuilding, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/digital-peacebuilding-cop>.

these groups is easier due to the slower pace of content creation and the pre-existing trust between the members. In this circumstance, the assurance of quality content trades against its diversity and creativity, as the pre-existing bonds and similarity of the members narrow the number of perspectives on offer.

Larger practice communities that seek to provide diverse viewpoints and a real sense of community will have to grapple more fully with content strategy, as they hope that members use CoP-administered spaces to meet, trade advice, and share content.

The rest of this section offers advice on themes to manage content, trusting the reader to pick and choose an appropriate suite of strategies given the amount of content strategy needed.³⁴

CoP content comes from two major categories of sources: original content created by members for the community's consumption and externally generated content relevant and valuable to the community's practice. CoPs that want to drive engagement capable of creating community need a steady stream of content to get members habituated into returning regularly to the CoP space. Curation strategies differ for member-generated and externally generated content. The best curation strategies depend quite a bit on what facilitators hope to build. Curation and moderation strategies overlap quite a bit, as both implicate assessing and culling content.

While very little science addresses the question of how to mix these sources, a number of institutions that host and advise CoPs consider 40 percent original content to be both sustainable and appealing to membership.³⁵ These institutions also argue that CoPs should provide both high-cost, high-enrichment content (like formal seminars) and low-cost opportunities to generate quick insights (such as message boards). The lower-cost information channels assure that the CoP always has something new, while production of higher-cost content provides value to members.

The section on participation, above, considers how to ensure that members are willing to provide content, but how should facilitators curate the content members decide to provide? Here are some useful considerations:

Know the membership: Regular surveys of or check-ins with members can serve two important purposes. First, they help establish what the membership wants to learn about. Second, they let facilitators know who in the membership might be able to provide good insights. Identify membership needs and seek out knowledgeable members to provide seminars or long, multi-media posts.

34 Given the size, intentions and close networks observed in peacebuilding CoPs by FACE Peace, we will not discuss the use of automated moderation tools such as machine learning or AI. For an overview of these topics, please see Chung-Sheng Li, Guanglei Xiong, and Emmanuel Munguia Tapia, "New Frontiers in Cognitive Content Curation and Moderation," APSIPA Transactions on Signal and Information Processing 7 (2018): e7.

35 Masooma Memon, "A Beginner's Guide to Content Curation," Content Studio Blog, October 25, 2022, <https://blog.contentstudio.io/major-steps-content-curation/>; Ross Hudgens, "The 3 Most Effective (and Overlooked) Content Curation Strategies," Content Marketing Institute, April 15, 2016, <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/articles/content-curation-strategies/>; and Kirsti Lang, "The Art of Community Moderation: Your 7-Step Guide," Updated May 12, 2022, Commsor, <https://www.commsor.com/post/community-moderation>.

Structure low-cost communication opportunities: Host a blog with a simple submission form, but require the members to tag their submissions with pre-existing topics. Create a message board with topic-driven sub-boards. As described in Section III below, boards based on common social interests, such as “Restaurants in Washington, DC” or “Travel Tips” can build a sense of community.

Contextualize outside contributions: Members are more likely to interact with content when facilitators contextualize and explain why the content matters.³⁶ Highlighting photos or graphics can draw the eye, but members also want to see the justification for posting the content. Pull out key quotes or compare to articles and perspectives offered elsewhere. Ask how a potential piece of content serves your community, and use the answer as your lede.³⁷

Select from less-considered sources: If your members care enough to join a CoP on a topic, chances are good they follow the most important news and trade sources. Repeating content members have already seen reduces confidence that the CoP provides added value or perspective. Consider identifying sources where content matches 10-20 percent with the interests of your CoP, and use the best articles from these sources.³⁸ Consider RSS and alert services like Google Alerts and Talkwalker to flag content from unlikely sources.³⁹

As content comes in, moderation becomes an important part of the content strategy. In the peacebuilding context, few members are likely to engage in overtly anti-social behavior. Yet creating and enforcing a moderation strategy that removes toxic or irrelevant material can increase the members’ sense that their time and professionalism are respected.

Facilitators should take the time to observe the community’s culture and norms. While members value consistency in moderation rules,⁴⁰ in the longer term, communities benefit from moderation strategies that adjust to what the members want and expect. In this spirit, here are some considerations and recommendations, followed by a list of selected moderation policies used by medium-sized online communities (see box).

Pre-production versus post-production moderation: At the outset, practice communities that allow for members to post in official space will need to decide whether to approve member contributions before they appear to the broader community.⁴¹

Pre-production moderation works best where members might engage in toxic behavior but can also be useful as a quality check before posting longer-form member contributions, such as blog posts. This form of pre-production moderation focuses on providing feedback

36 Mikko Villi, Johanna Moisander, and Annamma Joy, “Social Curation in Consumer Communities: Consumers as Curators of Online Media Content,” ACR North American Advances (2012).

37 Michelle Martin, “The Complete Guide to Content Curation in 2022: Tools, Tips, Ideas,” Hootsuite, February 23, 2022, <https://blog.hootsuite.com/beginners-guide-to-content-curation/>.

38 Hudgens, “The 3 Most Effective,” supra, fn. 35.

39 Martin, “The Complete Guide,” supra, fn. 37.

40 Lang, “The Art of Community Moderation,” supra, fn. 35.

41 Li, et al., “Evolution of Wenger’s Concept,” supra, fn. 20.

to transform mediocre content into something compelling. Pre-production moderation of quick-response member interactions, such as chat or message boards, however, is not only time-consuming but also stifles otherwise free-flowing communication.

Post-production moderation requires facilitators to check content for appropriateness or relevance after sharing. Post-production moderation works best when facilitators broadly trust the membership and where member contributions are shorter and faster.

Retroactive pruning of less relevant content: Some content falls into a moderation gray zone: It does not violate the community’s moderation policy, but its tone or topic does not reflect what the facilitators want newcomers to see. In these cases, pruning older content after the membership has a chance to interact with it can strike a balance between encouraging members to participate and creating a coherent community.⁴²

Moderation responsibility: CoP facilitators might also consider who is responsible for moderating content. Current CoP practice identifies three potential models: peer, federated and centralized moderation.⁴³

Peer moderation requires CoP members to report offensive or irrelevant content to CoP facilitators. Peer moderation has the advantage of allowing communities to decide their own limits and relieves administrative burdens on facilitators. However, peer moderation is often least responsive; the offending content remains visible to the community until facilitators respond to a member’s report.

Federated moderation assigns moderation responsibility to specific members in specific parts of the CoP, usually based upon substantive theme. For example, a disarmament expert might oversee new posts with the “disarmament” tag on the CoP’s blog.

Federated moderation is most appropriate for large communities with multiple content streams. It is more pro-active than peer moderation and less burdensome than centralized models. Facilitators are responsible for assuring that moderators use similar approaches. (For an example of a federated moderation policy, see Box below.)

Centralized moderation requires facilitators to take full charge of examining content. Centralized moderation is more consistent and pro-active but increasingly time-consuming as the CoP grows.

Efficient moderation: All of the above moderation strategies can benefit from using the metrics of your CoP to determine when moderators should work. Are there particular times of day or members or content styles and tags that draw greater need for moderation work? Schedule content postings and moderation hours to work together.

42 Lang, “The Art of Community Moderation,” supra, fn. 35.

43 Li, et al., “Evolution of Wenger’s Concept,” supra, fn. 20.

Examples of Moderation Policies

Below you can find links to examples of content moderation policies from communities comparable in size and substantive scope to larger peacebuilding CoPs. These examples span public and private institutions with niche, low-traffic interests and popular sites.

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources: <https://engage.dnr.state.mn.us/moderation>

NYTimes WireCutter: <https://www.nytimes.com/wirecutter/comment-policy/>

Our Food Future (a site for food policy specialists): <https://foodfuture.ca/book-page/community-guidelines-and-content-moderation-policy>

Tor (a site for science fiction fans): <https://www.tor.com/moderation-policy/>

UN Data Revolution Working Group: <https://www.undatarevolution.org/moderation-policy/>

US Consumer Protection Bureau: <https://www.consumerfinance.gov/about-us/comment-policy/>

Reddit: <https://www.redditinc.com/policies/moderator-code-of-conduct>

(The code of conduct for Reddit, a large discussion board, provides a good example of a federated moderation policy with nested sub-boards for increasingly specific interests, as well as insight on how to delegate content strategy to sub-topics within the largest of CoPs.)

C. Conclusion and Summary

In sum, CoP facilitators can encourage member satisfaction and participation by incentivizing the production of useful information.

For most CoPs, the creation of useful content requires member buy-in, which facilitators can cultivate by assuring members that their contributions will pay off through a steady pace of content production by other members and by appealing to the altruistic and community-building instincts of members.

In most cases, CoPs will benefit from the curation and moderation of potential content. The intensity of this content strategy depends on the amount of content the community produces and the extent to which facilitators trust the community to remain pro-social and attentive to quality and relevance.

Many peacebuilding CoPs will decide against employing a content strategy, choosing (whether consciously or not) to present the members with a very limited stream of hand-picked content instead. This strategy works when the CoP's goal is to expose CoP members briefly to new or exciting ideas and practices.

Crucially, however, CoPs offering occasional, hand-selected content will struggle to generate new networks and mentorship relationships among members, and will also miss out on the useful insights of members on CoP topics. **Content produces engagement**, and engagement can provide substantial benefits to members.

The next section expands upon the notion of using content to produce community by looking at the determinants of community itself in the CoP.



III. Belonging

A CoP cannot survive on content alone. A community feeling keeps members invested. Members of practice communities that feature a sense of belonging are more likely to reach out to others to seek or provide support, and are more likely to trust content the CoP delivers. Members that feel like they belong are also more likely to provide content for the CoP.⁴⁴

Members wish to retain feelings of belonging and remain active in communities that afford this feeling.⁴⁵ Members also embrace and value the shared purpose of the practice community when they feel they belong.⁴⁶

In short, members are more likely to return to communities that feel like communities.⁴⁷

Feelings of belonging largely result from the development of a community's **social capital**. At a minimum, social capital refers to the amount and strength of friendly, non-professional ties between members of a network.⁴⁸ Other influential definitions focus on the ability of network members to organize and advocate for the norms and policies they prefer in the community.⁴⁹

As with the development of trust, generating social bonds online presents problems. Across age groups, countries and platforms, respondents to surveys report that friendships made online are less meaningful and that replacing in-person interaction with online leads to greater feelings of loneliness.⁵⁰

44 Sangmi Chai and Minkyun Kim, "A Socio-Technical Approach to Knowledge Contribution Behavior: An Empirical Investigation of Social Networking Sites Users," *International Journal of Information Management* 32, no. 2 (2012): 118-126.

45 Chai and Kim, "A Socio-Technical Approach," supra, fn. 44; Wei Gao, Zhaopeng Liu, and Jingyuan Li, "How Does Social Presence Influence SNS Addiction? A Belongingness Theory Perspective," *Computers in Human Behavior* 77 (2017): 347-355; Junpeng Guo, Zengguang Liu, and Yu Liu, "Key Success Factors for the Launch of Government Social Media Platform: Identifying the Formation Mechanism of Continuance Intention," *Computers in Human Behavior* 55 (2016): 750-763.

46 Jana Lay-Hwa Bowden, Jodie Conduit, Linda D. Hollebeek, Vilma Luoma-aho, and Birgit Andrine Apenes Solem, "The Role of Social Capital in Shaping Consumer Engagement within Online Brand Communities," *The Handbook of Communication Engagement* (2018): 491-504.

47 Liu, et al., "Social Support, Belongingness, and Value Co-Creation Behaviors," supra, fn. 25; Tingting Zhang, Jay Kandampully, and Anil Bilgihan, "Motivations for Customer Engagement in Online Co-Innovation Communities (OCCs): A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology* 6, no. 3 (2015): 311-328; and Eric W. T. Ngai, Spencer S. C. Tao, and Karen K. L. Moon, "Social Media Research: Theories, Constructs, and Conceptual Frameworks," *International Journal of Information Management* 35, no. 1 (2015): 33-44.

48 Chen, "The Factors Influencing," supra, fn. 4.

49 Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Rafaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

50 E.g., Yu Guo, Yiwei Li, and Naoya Ito, "Exploring the Predicted Effect of Social Networking Site Use on Perceived Social Capital and Psychological Well-Being of Chinese International Students in Japan," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 17, no. 1 (2014): 52-58; Lai Lei Lou, Zheng Yan, Amanda Nickerson, and Robert McMorris, "An Examination of the Reciprocal Relationship of Loneliness and Facebook Use among First-Year College Students," *Journal of Educational Computing Research* 46, no. 1 (2012): 105-117; and Pavica Sheldon, "Profiling the Non-Users: Examination of Life-Position Indicators, Sensation Seeking, Shyness, and Loneliness among Users and Non-Users of Social Network Sites," *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, no. 5 (2012): 1960-1965.

Yet users report **lower** levels of loneliness and **stronger** friendships when using internet technologies to supplement relationships made in person and when the online relationships are relevant to the users' career or hobbies.⁵¹

The combination of these findings points to a crucial task for practice community facilitators. Creating a meaningful community requires social interaction between members, some of which will almost certainly take place online. This interaction must be crafted to create opportunities for social and professional bonding.⁵²

A. Social Capital

Social capital is more than just the central cause of members' feelings of belonging. Social capital also helps develop the trust necessary for members to produce quality content and, simply put, makes the community of practice fun.

How can practice communities build social capital? We again assume that most facilitators of peacebuilding practice communities will opt for a hybrid in-person/distanced design, and the advice that follows breaks into three broad categories. First, we consider how CoPs with varying levels of resources could arrange and structure in-person social time. Then, we turn to strategies to help make the community as coherent, supportive and relevant as possible (a concern especially critical for more distanced communities). Finally, we consider ways to make online interactions between members as likely as possible to cultivate belonging.

1. In-Person Meetings of Members

Gathering the members of diverse practice communities is time-consuming, expensive and, from the members' perspectives, often presents a steep opportunity cost. Will attending this function pay off?

The effort and cost of in-person gatherings might make little sense for a minimalist community in which facilitators periodically present content to an audience of members. Smaller communities with co-located members or lots of cash might opt to splurge on periodic meetings. How can communities in the middle make the most of the investment in a physical gathering?

The first question when planning a physical gathering is: Who should come? Here, the logic mirrors the discussion of trust-building above. Larger communities should invite active members whose professional status, location or other characteristics make them likely

51 Rebecca Nowland, Elizabeth A. Necka, and John T. Cacioppo, "Loneliness and Social Internet Use: Pathways to Reconnection in a Digital World?" *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13, no. 1 (2018): 70-87; Robert Lemieux, Sean Lajoie, and Nathan E. Trainor, "Affinity-Seeking, Social Loneliness, and Social Avoidance among Facebook Users," *Psychological Reports* 112, no. 2 (2013): 545-552; and Jason L. Skues, Ben Williams, and Lisa Wise, "The Effects of Personality Traits, Self-Esteem, Loneliness, and Narcissism on Facebook Use among University Students," *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, no. 6 (2012): 2414-2419.

52 Gerard P. Hodgkinson and Mark P. Healey, "Toward a (Pragmatic) Science of Strategic Intervention: Design Propositions for Scenario Planning," *Organization Studies* 29, no. 3 (2008): 435-457.

leaders among members who do not attend. Depending upon resources, the community could facilitate in-person meetings at the regional level led by members who attended the main gathering earlier.

Facilitators should also consider convening a diverse group, especially with regard to professional roles. Participants in a wide variety of conference and off-site activities report higher satisfaction with relationship-building when the group is diverse.⁵³

Once facilitators have members together, how can they use the opportunity for maximum community-building effect?

Set a clear agenda: Clearly communicate the goals of the gathering and how you hope to meet them with members ahead of time. Mark out the portions of the agenda intended for professional and personal bonding.⁵⁴

Address big-picture topics: Members will attend your gathering in part to be professionally stimulated. Make use of the talent around you to explore issues and problems that lack a clear solution in your practice.⁵⁵

Focus on relationship-building: The community's basis is its shared practice, but while most activities should relate to peacebuilding in some way, the larger purpose is to direct the members' attention to their shared goals and values.

2. Coherent Communities

Communities feel like communities when something binds the members together, usually commonalities between members that not all individuals on the outside share. Many studies of CoPs show that shared vocabularies and shared norms can create a feeling of in-group cohesion that bonds group members together.⁵⁶ These commonalities lead members to believe “that community members have and will share history, time, places, and experiences.”⁵⁷

53 Mark P. Healey, Gerard P. Hodgkinson, Richard Whittington, and Gerry Johnson, “Off to Plan or Out to Lunch? Relationships between Design Characteristics and Outcomes of Strategy Workshops,” *British Journal of Management* 26, no. 3 (2015): 507-528.

54 Melissa Raffoni, “6 Tips for Running Offsites That Aren’t a Waste of Time,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 22, 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/07/6-tips-for-running-offsites-that-arent-a-waste-of-time>.

55 Bob Frisch and Logan Chandler, “Offsites that Work,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2006, <https://hbr.org/2006/06/offsites-that-work>.

56 Liu, et al., “Social Support, Belongingness, and Value Co-Creation Behaviors,” *supra*, fn. 25; and Bagozzi and Dholakia, “Intentional Social Action,” *supra*, fn. 2.

57 Joon Koh, Young-Gul Kim, and Young-Gul Kim, “Sense of Virtual Community: A Conceptual Framework and Empirical Validation,” *International Journal of Electronic Commerce* 8, no. 2 (2003): 75-94.

Building coherence in a CoP takes up-front energy from facilitators, but many communities reach a tipping point, past which the adoption of common vocabulary and norms is self-sustaining.⁵⁸ New members mimic and eventually adopt the behavior of other members, and the elements that make the CoP feel distinct from the rest of the peacebuilding field maintain themselves organically.

Below are several approaches to cultivating this sense of in-group cohesion — appropriate for use by all CoPs, whatever the balance of in-person and distanced events:

Defining technical terms: Peacebuilders use many terms of art, often (and unknowingly) differently. Facilitators might consider whether some terms central to the community’s practice mission require discussion or debate to define. The community might then agree to use this common definition in in-group discussions. For example, the Interagency Gender Working Group encouraged facilitators of sub-groups to host discussions on the meaning of “transgender” and “non-binary,” with a focus on finding not only an agreeable definition but also one that suited that group’s work.

Informal discussion of key concepts: Sometimes a lighter touch to developing a shared vocabulary works better. By providing space, such as a themed, temporary chat or posting board, or a short session at an in-person event, CoP members will organically come to discuss problematic terms and begin to use them in similar ways.

Highlighting shared conceptions: When facilitators notice that members have solved a thorny definitional issue, they can point out the agreement and take care to use and define the term consistently with it. Network champions (see sub-heading in Section B, below) can also discuss the usefulness of the shared term and explain how it clarifies concepts crucial to practice.

Problem-orientation⁵⁹: Collaborating on a solution to a specific problem is fundamental to connecting members into a coherent community. For example, members gather to solve problems, applying and co-constructing new knowledge, which, in turn, is transformed into solutions that can be stored and revisited in the future, as a form of collective memory.

Value statements and common norms: CoPs should consider adopting simple value statements that connect their specific practice to the broader field of peacebuilding. While the peacebuilding values can be broad and shared among all peacebuilders, the connection between the practice goals of the group and these values should be specific enough to communicate the group’s philosophy and reason for existence to members.

58 Amit Goldenberg and James J. Gross, “Digital Emotion Contagion,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 24, no. 4 (2020): 316-328.

59 Marco Antonio de Carvalho-Filho, René A. Tio, and Yvonne Steinert, “Twelve Tips for Implementing a Community of Practice for Faculty Development,” *Medical Teacher* 42, no. 2 (2020): 143-149; Gilbert Probst and Stefano Borzillo, “Why Communities of Practice Succeed and Why They Fail,” *European Management Journal* 26, no. 5 (2008): 335-347.

Where possible, members should participate in writing or revising the value statement as the CoP matures, similar to the development of common definitions of important words (see bullet point above).

Once the value statement is developed, facilitators and moderators can and should contextualize CoP content in the language of the value statement.

3. *Systems of Informal Professional Support*

The main purpose of a practice community is to develop member capacity for specific practices. The value of the community to members can extend substantially beyond the practice benefits, however, expanding member networks and opportunities for mentorship. This subsection lays out the definitions of several types of informal professional support that can contribute to a sense of belonging among CoP members.

Effects of Social Time

A wide range of research demonstrates that social bonding time can help build a sense of belonging and support among members. This box describes how social time can affect a variety of outcomes related to CoP success.

PROCESS

Shared Norms

Shared Vocabulary

Social/Emotional Support

Esteem Support

EFFECT

Shared norms can mean more than norms about practice; they can relate to how members treat and communicate with each other. These norms are best formed through experience.

Social time allows communities to develop shared communication styles, vocabulary and inside jokes based upon CoP experiences that help define the group in contrast to outsiders.

Membership groups with social bonds see each other holistically and are more likely to offer each other support with professional problems that are more complex and subjective.

Membership groups with social bonds take time to explain concepts (especially drawing from shared vocabulary and norms) and to reassure other members that they have the required skills and knowledge.

PROCESS**Companionship****Trust****Altruism****EFFECT**

CoP members that offer social time or space often become friends with other members; interacting with those members in a common space makes the CoP more enjoyable.

CoP members who know each other socially see each other more holistically and are more likely to trust one another.

CoP members are more likely to donate time to a group they see as a bonded and whole community.

Cultivating informational support⁶⁰: Informational support refers to the ability of CoP members to seek help on practice-related issues outside the formal content production of the CoP. Strong informational support is associated with feelings of community belonging among members, both because members get answers and because they feel valuable by providing them.

CoPs can foster informational support in several ways, including: the creation of a message or posting board, the creation of a formal mentorship matching program, or the hosting of more open informational sessions that feature Q&As with senior members of the CoP.

Cultivating esteem support⁶¹: CoPs that make members feel like respected, capable experts are more likely to draw them back to the community over and over. Facilitators can generate esteem support by couching CoP content and outreach in terms that communicate the value of members and the difficult, technical nature of the challenges members confront in their professional lives.

Member-to-member communication also plays a major role in developing esteem support. Members in communities with common norms and vocabulary can be encouraged by network champions (see Section B, below) to use the language of growth mindset and mutual admiration. Other members will likely emulate this attitude, leading to a general membership that feels self-actualized through their interaction with the CoP.

Cultivating emotional and social support: Members prefer to return to and interact with communities that treat them with empathy, especially considering that both programming and career development in the peacebuilding field often involve a great deal of personal emotional investment. While the appropriate line between professional and personal

60 Liu, et al., "Social Support, Belongingness, and Value Co-Creation Behaviors," supra, fn. 25.

61 Tabor E. Flickinger, Claire DeBolt, Ava Lena Waldman, George Reynolds, Wendy F. Cohn, Mary Catherine Beach, Karen Ingersoll, and Rebecca Dillingham, "Social Support in a Virtual Community: Analysis of a Clinic-Affiliated Online Support Group for Persons Living with HIV/AIDS," *AIDS and Behavior* 21 (2017): 3087-3099; and Liu, et al., "Social Support, Belongingness, and Value Co-Creation Behaviors," supra, fn. 25.

sharing depends on the context and norms of the group, practice communities that leave members feeling supported through practice-related challenges (and beyond) are more likely to see returning members.⁶²

Facilitators can set and calibrate a tone of emotional and social support by creating specific spaces within the CoP for such discussions. They might, for example, host sessions on career management, stress management or emotional labor in the context of the community's specified practice. Facilitators might feature content at the intersection of practice themes and social themes.

Cultivating companionship: The bullet points above concern types of support that bridge the divide between the practice and social desires of members. Members also prefer to contribute to practice communities where they have friends.⁶³ CoP members are, of course, unlikely to attend purely social events through the community before friend networks have been established. Instead, facilitators might encourage socialization by building discussion or project groups around common interests, or by providing asynchronous, online spaces to bond over other topics. See the box below for more suggestions.

Developing Social Ties at a Distance

By now, the value of social ties, and social time to build them, should be apparent to potential facilitators of a peacebuilding CoP. Yet the modal CoP is a distanced affair, consisting of blogs, Zoom-hosted seminars and chat boards. How can facilitators generate social affection at a distance?

Fortunately, a wide range of evidence suggests that we can have socially fulfilling interactions online, even where the communication is not particularly data-rich. Anecdotal and scientific reports of friendships blossoming over audio streams during online gaming and internet chat boards that offer little but text demonstrate that common interest can underwrite strong social bonds even where the social interaction available to members is thin.

62 Tung-Ching Lin, Jack Shih-Chieh Hsu, Hsiang-Lan Cheng, and Chao-Min Chiu, "Exploring the Relationship between Receiving and Offering Online Social Support: A Dual Social Support Model," *Information & Management* 52, no. 3 (2015): 371-383.

63 Ling Zhao, Yaobin Lu, Bin Wang, Patrick Y. K. Chau, and Long Zhang, "Cultivating the Sense of Belonging and Motivating User Participation in Virtual Communities: A Social Capital Perspective," *International Journal of Information Management* 32, no. 6 (2012): 574-588.

Some concrete suggestions for bonding at a distance:

Networking coffee dates: Encourage members to sign up to be assigned online coffee dates with random other members.

“Ask me anything” spotlights: Select members willing to answer a broad range of questions about their careers and personal development. (This works especially well when junior members are interested in meeting senior members!)

Icebreaking questions: We know, we know. Everyone rolls their eyes at icebreakers. But they work!⁶⁴ FACE Peace writers participate in “Question of the Week” at staff meetings and can verify that the weirdest questions work best.

Gratitude channels: Allow members to highlight those who have provided special service or mentorship. Gratitude channels on Slack or chatrooms can make use of hashtags, or facilitators can round up shoutouts in periodic emails to members.

Synchronized activities: Many larger companies sponsor cooking or cocktail social hours in which members receive ingredients and then cook together with instruction over Zoom. Other possibilities include photo scavenger hunts and trivia contests. (Well-funded CoPs should note: Prizes help!)

Family involvement: GitLab, a fully remote tech firm, learns about the hobbies of participating employees’ children and organizes “juice box chats” so that the kids can bond.

Talent shows: Have a brave membership? Consider a way to let members showcase talents or hobbies to generate conversation.

Other resources for socializing at a distance:

Socially distant team-building activities: <https://teambuilding.com/blog/socially-distant-team-building>

Games for remote groups: <https://www.atlassian.com/blog/teamwork/virtual-team-building-activities-remote-teams>

64 Chlup, Dominique T., and Tracy E. Collins. “Breaking the ice: Using ice-breakers and re-energizers with adult learners.” *Adult Learning* 21, no. 3-4 (2010): 34-39; Zwaagstra, Lynn. “Group Dynamics and Initiative Activities with Outdoor Programs.” (1997).

Developing social capital, often through the provision of social time for members, returns substantial dividends for CoP facilitators. In the next section we consider a few other design elements of CoPs that encourage members to feel a sense of belonging.

B. Other Routes to Belonging

Outside of the various ways to build belonging through social capital, three other elements can be useful: the use of “network champions,” the structure of members’ connections to each other, and fun. As with our previous discussions, these strategies are all the most important for CoPs that operate mostly at a distance and also seek more robust member participation, networking, and membership. We focus especially on strategies for having fun through a screen.

1. Network Champions

A network champion is “someone well respected within an organization, often holding a leadership position, and responsible for spreading the word about the group, recruiting members, and providing resources for group activities.”⁶⁵ The enthusiasm of network champions about the CoP’s content and mission is associated with higher feelings of belonging in the group, ***especially in groups that meet primarily online.***⁶⁶

Network champions serve as a focal point for the CoP, and facilitators can use communication from champions to amplify or underscore important messages.⁶⁷ For example, a respected member of the broader peacebuilding field seen using the group’s shared vocabulary or approving of the group’s shared norms can ramp up adoption among other members. Similarly, network champions can visibly provide one or more of the types of support that build belonging or participate in social activities to draw other members in.

2. Network Structure

A sense of belonging often starts with pairs of members who discover common interests and bond through their discussion of the CoP’s practice interest.⁶⁸ When these pairs are offered work projects to complete together, the relationship develops characteristics of social support. CoP facilitators might consider gathering basic information about the social interests of members and creating small working groups focused on practice issues but also constructed to put members with outside interests together.

65 Li, et al., “Evolution of Wenger’s Concept,” supra, fn. 20.

66 Koh, et. al., “Sense of Virtual Community,” supra, fn. 57.

67 Bourhis and Dubé, “Structuring Spontaneity,” 175-193, supra, fn. 1; and Koh, et. al., “Sense of Virtual Community,” supra, fn. 57.

68 Haythornthwaite, “A Social Network Study,” supra, fn. 30.

3. *Fun!*

Unsurprisingly, members are more likely to return and contribute to CoPs where they have fun.⁶⁹ Returning to the CoP out of a sense of enjoyment gives members more contact with each other and creates a lighter atmosphere. But how can we make CoPs fun?

Peer members: Members are more likely to make friends with others of their own age bracket and seniority and therefore more likely to return to CoPs that feature large peer memberships.⁷⁰

CoP facilitators can make use of this observation by structuring CoP projects or social opportunities around demographic characteristics (such as a Young Peacebuilders, Women Peacebuilders, or Asian Peacebuilders conversation group) or professional experiences (such as a particular region of residence) that might cause members to bond.

Complementarity: Members like to have multiple channels to express themselves, including the ability to chat or to share links, pictures and music.⁷¹ Tapscott and others refer to this use of multiple channels to create a more complete atmosphere as “complementarity.”

Multimedia: When it comes to consuming content, design and immersion matter! For more details on creating an immersive online experience, see Section IV below.

C. Conclusion and Summary

Members of practice communities that feel like communities are more likely to return and contribute to the community’s practice purpose. Like members of other successful communities, practice community members that experience a sense of belonging often have multi-dimensional relationships with at least some of their peers and get a sense of enjoyment out of the community’s common purpose.

Cultivating belonging therefore requires that members have the opportunity to discuss topics beyond practice and can then bring the energy and richness of these multiplex relationships back to the practice purpose. As described above, there are a number of ways to get members to know each other better and a number of ways to encourage them to see the CoP as enjoyable.



69 E.g., Ji-Won Moon and Young-Gul Kim, “Extending the TAM for a World-Wide-Web Context,” *Information & Management* 38, no. 4 (2001): 217-230.

70 Kuan-Yu Lin and Hsi-Peng Lu, “Why People Use Social Networking Sites: An Empirical Study Integrating Network Externalities and Motivation Theory,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 27, no. 3 (2011): 1152-1161.

71 Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Next Generation Is Changing Your World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008).

IV. Balancing Accessibility with Rich Content

Peacebuilding CoPs face a particularly challenging trade-off when it comes to organizing and presenting content. As the sections above have discussed in brief, members are drawn to CoPs with rich, multi-media content and design-forward spaces. Members bond and build trust best when they can meet in person or synchronously. Yet these elements often reduce accessibility for potential members without strong data infrastructure or who live in time zones with business hours out of sync with New York or Geneva.

This section focuses on making online information richer and more accessible to as wide a variety of members as your practice touches. We focus on online content because the debates on making in-person content accessible are relatively intuitive and easy to summarize: CoPs hoping to make in-person events accessible need to relieve as much of the burden of travel as possible on poorer and more vulnerable members. This plainly includes paying for the travel and other associated costs of attendance, but facilitators also need to be sensitive to work and caregiving obligations, as well as to cultural expectations of visitors. We're all aware, for example, that mothers of young children crossing multiple time zones face steeper non-monetary costs to attending conferences than the average late-career professional popping from New York to DC. Leveling this playing field requires creativity in response to individual circumstances and a willingness to shoulder more cost.

From here, this section considers the organization and accessibility of online content. We begin with the basic issue of organizing diverse content in ways that allow members to find content seamlessly, and then consider users with low internet bandwidth before moving on to more specific personal challenges and disabilities.

A. Engaging Organization and Presentation

Substantial research demonstrates that CoP members are more likely to return to communities that operate as effective information management systems.⁷² CoPs use a variety of information delivery systems that can be optimized for access and organization, including:

- blogs or similar streams of new content;
- repositories for archived content;
- chat boards or other sites for member-to-member interaction;
- synchronous events, such as seminars.

⁷² Chen, "The Factors Influencing," *supra*, fn. 4; William H. DeLone and Ephraim R. McLean, "Measuring E-Commerce Success: Applying the DeLone & McLean Information Systems Success Model," *International Journal of Electronic Commerce* 9, no. 1 (2004): 31-47.

CoPs that archive content should consider an archival process that keeps posts well-organized and invites members to view them. The suggestions that follow help organize content without adding substantial technical burdens and are good practice for all CoP facilitators:

Content tags: Most readers are already aware that “tagging” content with its substantive themes helps users navigate quickly to similar posts. Revisit the tags your members find most useful, and consider whether tags that never get used indicate a need to highlight a different feature of the content in question.

Facilitators can consider the spirit of content tagging in other areas. For example, many chat boards feature nested sub-topics that allow users to self-sort their contributions. A peacebuilding-focused chat board might include an “off topic” sub-board, with sub-sub-boards focused on travel, career advice, cooking and other common hobbies.

Inverted pyramid writing: The vast majority of readers don’t get beyond the third paragraph of a blog or content description post.⁷³ Make sure to lay out a general summary of the content quickly in the feed or blog. This invites interested readers to dive in and allows members seeking different content to move on quickly.

Inventive formatting: Visual elements, such as photos and bullet lists, can keep members reading farther into each item. Keep in mind that visual elements should be scaled to match the width of your format and should never take up the reader’s entire screen.

Varied content type: How often do your members expect new content? How often can you publish? Section II (B) above argues that CoPs should present content from other sources to enrich the information and perspectives offered to members, but it is also important to vary the types of content offered to members. This is particularly true of presentation type. For example, between longer, original posts or invitations to seminar events, CoP facilitators can present short videos, info-graphics and micro-posts. Much in the same way that varying sentence lengths can draw in readers, varying content type makes a feed more enticing.

B. Accessibility for Low-Bandwidth Users

Many peacebuilding CoPs wish to engage users from around the world but design websites and other digital assets that presume first-rate internet infrastructure. The following practices will help ensure that members with lower bandwidth can still fully engage with the content:

73 Ashley Harbin, “Best Blogging Practices,” Parallel Interactive, February 21, 2021, <https://www.parallelinteractive.com/blogging-best-practices/>.

Compression of image files: Many facilitators post full-size images on content pages, even though the image is sized down. Compress your image to retain a sharp quality without taxing your members' bandwidth. (See here how to compress an image on a [Mac](#) or with [Microsoft](#).)

Optimized PDFs: Do you plan to share reports or other long documents with your CoP? Images can load faster when compressed, but PDFs have their own formatting tricks. Read here for more: <http://www.aptivate.org/webguidelines/PDFs.html>

Mobile sites: CoPs with the resources may wish to create a mobile version of the community's website so that it is more easily accessible via cell phone.

Navigation signposts: No one wants to click unnecessary links to find what they need, but users with low internet speed may simply close the page after waiting ages to be in the wrong spot.

Low-bandwidth "shell": Creating an initial landing page with few graphics and links to the most popular content allows users one fewer "heavy" click to get to the page they need.

Cacheable sites: Allow users' web browsers to store image and structural elements of your websites for faster loading when they visit again. Low-speed users may in fact prefer to return to your site over other alternatives when speed matters.⁷⁴

C. Ability and Disability

This section considers some basic tips for making websites and digital assets accessible to people who might approach the site differently due to disability or lack of experience with the internet.

Technical support: The provision of basic IT support, including videos about using key online CoP features, substantially increases the number of times members return to the CoP.⁷⁵ While the operation of most CoP tools feels instinctual to many, the diversity of the peacebuilding field all but guarantees that the facilitator's assumptions about what is easy will turn out to be wrong for at least some of the membership.

Descriptive text links: Visually impaired users can ask their browsers to read link titles. Instead of writing "[click here](#) to read more about our community," consider "to learn more, read the [About Our Community](#) page."

Alt-text for images: Alt-text has become common, as visually impaired users can utilize tools in their browsers to hear descriptions of images.

74 "Web Design Guidelines for Low Bandwidth," Aptivate, accessed February 21, 2023, <http://www.aptivate.org/webguidelines/Caching.html>.

75 Bourhis and Dubé, "Structuring Spontaneity," supra, fn. 1.

Font size and page layout: Many web hosting services and internet browsers allow users with poor vision to increase the size of a website's font, but increasing the size often affects the page layout. Make sure that your web service maintains the layout with size changes to ensure that the clarity and engagement strategy in the original size is maintained.

Contrast and color: Eight percent of people are red/green colorblind! Focus on using normally weighted fonts, with dark text (black or dark blue) against light backgrounds. This will also ensure that users who need to reverse the contrast will see bright text on a black background.

ARIA roles: If your website or other digital assets are being professionally designed, discuss the use of ARIA roles with your designer. These features create tags for assistive web browsing technologies that enhance the browsing experience for users with sensory disabilities.



V. Conclusion

This design brief has explored how humanitarian development CoPs can create and present useful, accessible information in a community that establishes a sense of belonging among members. The suggestions offered above are extensive, though not exhaustive, and CoP facilitators using this design brief should not expect to implement them all. Instead, facilitators should consider their goals and resources, and the characteristics of their membership, and make critical decisions about which suggestions seem to fit best.

Practice communities offer the field of peacebuilding substantial benefits. They offer opportunities to share and spread knowledge about specific and technical tasks. Practice communities especially benefit professionals who carry out unique tasks within their respective organizations and who therefore benefit from contacts across institutions.

The peacebuilding field includes a wide variety of practice communities with a great deal of variation in the ambition of their goals, their resource constraints and the breadth of their membership. The advice in this design brief addresses primarily the tough trade-offs faced by facilitators who want their membership to be diverse and involved but lack the resources to provide substantial in-person time.

Facilitators who prefer to provide high-quality, highly curated content to a more passive membership can afford to pick and choose fewer of the strategies offered here. Members of such communities will come and go mostly as a function of facilitator quality. Facilitators of better resourced or less geographically diverse communities also have more flexibility: Providing ample in-person interaction all but assures the eventual emergence of a coherent and trusting community.

Diverse practice communities that hope to showcase the careers and insights of their members and promote networking and membership between them need to engage with a wider range of the design brief's advice. These communities succeed for their members first and foremost when they improve a member's practice. Many members also show interest in networking within CoPs for career development. Both goals typically require members to regularly engage with the CoP.

The first goal — improving practice — involves incentivizing members to participate by creating content. CoPs often rely on members to produce a variety of content, ranging from hosting full-on seminars to interacting with and providing advice and feedback to other members through micro-blogs or chat boards. CoPs can offer a variety of incentives for producing content depending on two characteristics of the community: its financial resources and the pre-existing ties between members. Well-funded CoPs can offer payment for high-quality content. CoPs with well-bonded membership can rely on reputational incentives. Others will need to consult Section II more carefully.

The second goal — career development — involves generating opportunities for social time. Here the major decision point concerns whether the CoP will meet entirely at a distance or whether there will be opportunities for in-person, synchronous meetings. Social time is very important for developing trust and bonding between members. Members bond more naturally in person than through IT mediums. Still our recent experiences during the COVID pandemic have provided a lot of insight about how we can build social bonds remotely. Section III provides a number of suggestions to get people bonding at a distance and describes how those strategies allow for better practice communities.

Finally, while we understand that media-rich content helps sustain attention and increase feelings of enjoyment, many crucial voices in peacebuilding are not well-positioned to load graphics-heavy websites or join synchronous meetings set to New York's time zone. Section IV therefore addressed these and other issues of access, suggesting a number of ways to create rich content while also reducing the burden on those with less robust internet connections, who live in time zones out of sync with most other members, or who might contend with other barriers to access.

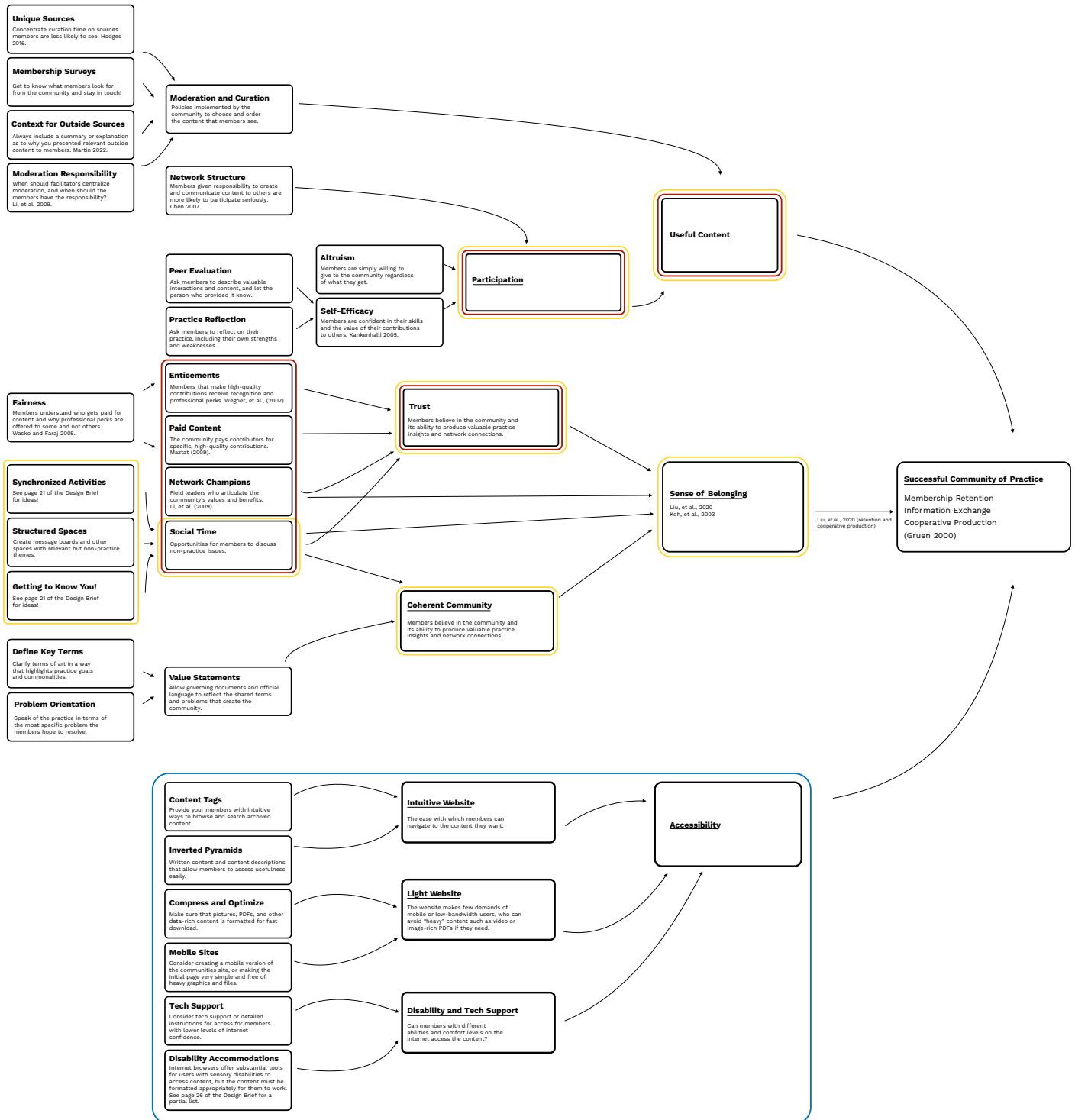
Addressing these concerns will assure that future generations of peacebuilders can create supporting, inclusive communities that enhance practice and results around the globe. Emerging technologies present challenges but also, perhaps even more so, opportunities as we discover how to use them to build lasting communities.



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