

Communities of Practice



The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice says that Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) “understand the value of reflective practice and leadership development and how continuous professional learning supports their professional growth and contributes to improving the quality of early childhood education for children, families and communities (Standard IV: B.3).”

The College of Early Childhood Educators has developed this resource to support RECEs to understand communities of practice. A professional learning goal could be to do additional research to learn more about communities of practice and how to pursue, develop, join or engage in this professional learning experience. Participating in a community of practice is one example of a continuous professional learning activity that could support RECEs in reaching their goals and engaging in the CPL Portfolio process.

What is a community of practice?

The College defines **communities of practice** for RECEs in this way:

A group of professionals who share a concern or passion about a practice topic and who wish to learn how to improve this area of practice by communicating and collaborating with each other regularly over time.¹ Communities of practice are examples of reflective practice and collaborative inquiry.

In a community of practice, RECEs come together to discuss, learn and strategize ways in which to better understand or advance a shared passion as a group and as individuals in daily practice. The voices and perspectives of all members are reflected in the work of a community of practice.

What do communities of practice look like?

Communities of practice are also referred to as collaborative learning communities, professional learning communities or learning circles. Some may be large, formal gatherings and others are small and close-knit with only a few members.

In-person Meetings: Communities of practice often occur in face-to-face meeting spaces where members benefit from the dialogue that takes place in-person. Members may gather together one evening of every month or even every week to discuss their shared topic of interest. Members may come together from a range of early learning and care settings or they may have one practice setting in common such as a child care centre, school or family support centre in which they work.

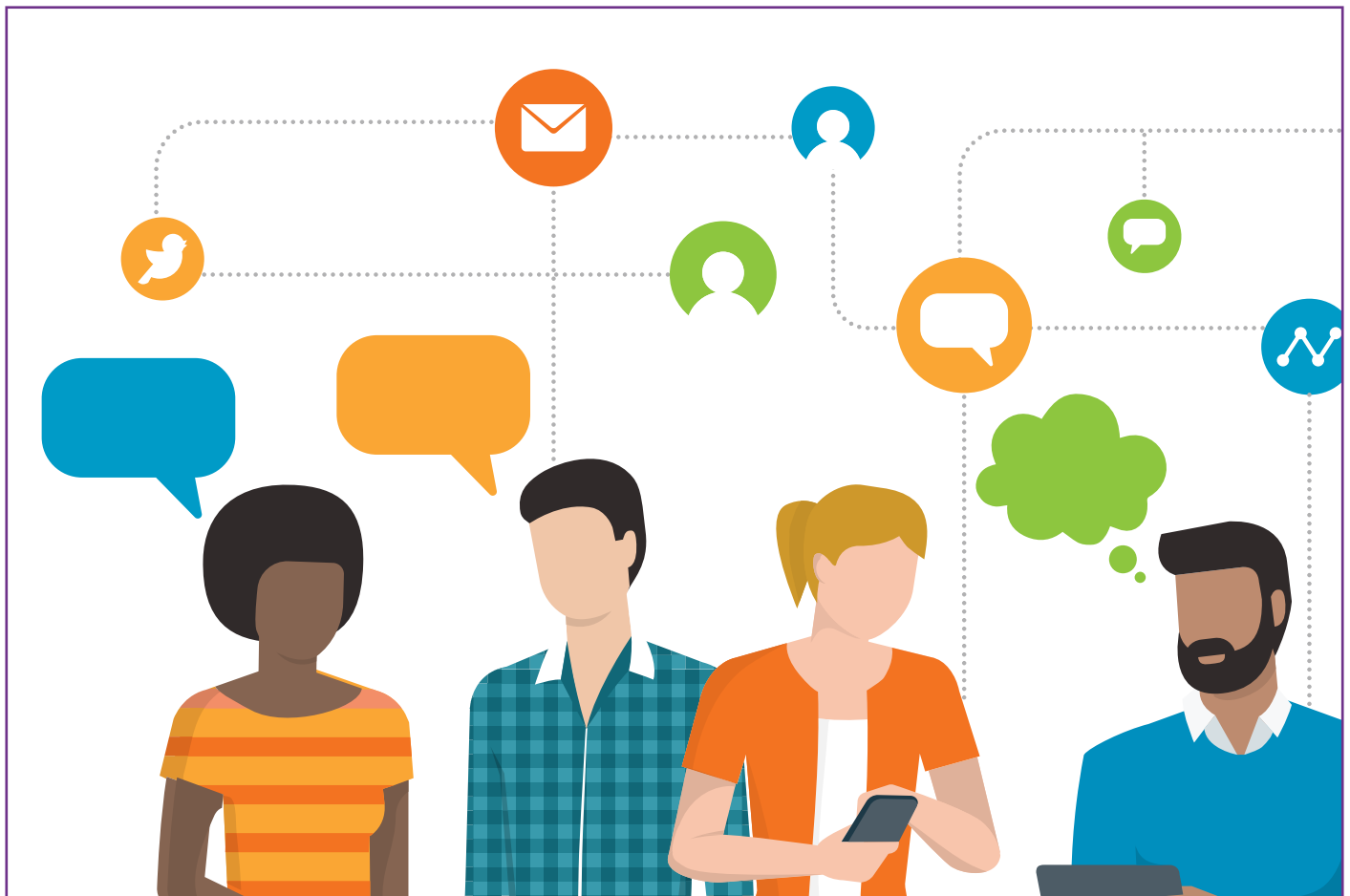
Online communities of practice: Online communities of practice, which are often less structured and do not always revolve around one shared passion or practice topic, provide a variety of resources and opportunities that are not dependent on location. Social networking sites, discussion boards and blogs help to facilitate informal online communities of practice.

How do RECEs join or create a community of practice?

RECEs who are interested in joining or creating a community of practice are encouraged to connect with their colleagues in their professional community. Structured and formal professional learning experiences like conferences or supervisor network meetings may be a good place to start talking to people about a specific shared passion. Reaching out to a professional association, local professional resource centre or connecting with professionals from a post-secondary institution or network may also create contacts with other like-minded professionals.

Joining a community of practice requires some investigative work, initiative and creativity. Communities of practice might not be clearly advertised and RECEs may need to create their own learning community in order to realize their professional goals. Connecting with other RECEs either in-person or online is a critical first step to creating a community of practice.

Standard IV from the Code and Standards reminds RECEs to “engage with their professional community through activities such as participation in research, associations, committees, or professional networks, or by acting as a role model or mentor” (Standard IV: C.7).



What are the key components of a community of practice?

Communities of practice typically have several components:

- Members
- Leadership roles
- Protocols and agreements
- Time

While these components help to create successful communities of practice, RECEs may wish to adapt them to support their own learning in their community.

1. Members

Effective communication and collaboration is essential to the work of communities of practice. A range of professional expertise and experiences allows for diversity of perspectives and presents opportunities for discussion that enrich the learning process for all members.

The broad role of all members is to share knowledge with others as co-learners, reflect on practice, build consensus and make informed choices to support improved practice.

RECEs that belong to a community of practice should:

- demonstrate an interest and willingness to reflect upon, explore and enhance some aspect of their own professional practice
- challenge and question their beliefs and practices
- share a common passion or concern with other members
- demonstrate a commitment to continuous professional learning and an understanding of the reflective practice model and its value
- provide input and discuss opinions openly in a positive, constructive manner
- be honest, respectful and maintain confidentiality.

2. Leadership Roles

Communities of practice are most successful when one member steps into a leadership role and guides the structure and group learning process by becoming a **facilitator**.

The role of the facilitator is to:

- keep the group process moving forward
- give individual attention to group members
- monitor group dynamics
- offer clarification on issues or confusion
- point out breakthroughs in understanding
- summarize the ideas generated.²

It is important to note that the facilitator is not the group's teacher; they are part of the community of practice but provide guidance and connect learning to the broader, shared concern. The role of facilitator can also rotate among members depending on new learning and growth.

A **critical or essential friend** also takes on a leadership role within a community of practice but may behave differently from the facilitator. Critical friends support the work of a community of practice by asking "provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens and offers critique of a person's work as a friend...Critical friendships, therefore, must begin through building trust."³

Critical friends:

- support the individual learning and thinking of specific group members
- challenge the thinking of the group as a whole
- assume a leadership role but are equally friends who offer support, scaffold learning and further self-reflection.

Some facilitators may also act as critical friends to RECEs in a community of practice. While there is typically only one facilitator in a community of practice, there may be several critical friends within a group.

3. Protocols and Agreements

Productive communities of practice adopt and adhere to a set of guiding questions or a protocol. **Protocols** help members of a community of practice "organize their thinking about the complexity of the...learning process."⁴

RECEs can develop reflective protocols by consulting pedagogical frameworks like *How Does Learning Happen?* or the *Kindergarten Program, 2016*. Curtis, Cividanes and Carter suggest the Thinking Lens protocol as one useful resource for RECEs and serves to guide thinking and discussion within a community of practice.⁵

Communities of practice also tend to have a structure and a mutually agreed upon set of rules or procedures. **Agreements** enable group members to establish the trust required to engage in productive and honest reflective practice. They may be aspirational or outline a clear process for conflict resolution.

In addition to the shared concern of the members, protocols and agreements contribute to the unique identity of a community of practice.

4. Time

New perspectives, strategies and improved practices do not occur overnight. In order to critically reflect, learn and build relationships time is a key component of successful communities of practice. Amber Holmes notes in her article that, "life-long friendships and deeper understandings are common products of this model, which is process-oriented and does not obligate particular outcomes."⁶

How do RECEs benefit from working within a community of practice?

Participating in a community of practice is one way RECEs can work toward accomplishing professional learning goals as part of the CPL Portfolio process. According to Anne Marie Coughlin and Lorrie Baird, “The establishment of professional learning communities is one of the most powerful staff development strategies we have to build capacity in others and shift our focus from teaching to learning.”⁷

Engaging in a community of practice is also beneficial because over time, members will “develop a unique perspective on a topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices and approaches.”⁸ A community of practice enables RECEs to reflect upon their practice and learn with others in order to improve their practice. “Although it is possible to be a reflective teacher on your own, reflecting with a group of coworkers offers a richer experience of camaraderie, multiple perspectives, deeper learning and shared enjoyment of your work together.”⁹

The Code and Standards says that RECEs “build positive relationships with colleagues by demonstrating respect, trust and integrity. They support, mentor and collaborate with colleagues, including students aspiring to the profession.

RECEs value lifelong learning and reflective practice and engage in the Continuous Professional Learning program (Ethic C.)”



Endnotes

1. Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
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4. Curtis, D, Lebo, D., Cividanes, W., & Carter, M. (2013). *Reflecting in Communities of Practice: A Workbook for Early Childhood Educators*. St. Paul: Redleaf Press.
5. Curtis, D, Lebo, D., Cividanes, W., & Carter, M. (2013). *Reflecting in Communities of Practice: A Workbook for Early Childhood Educators*. St. Paul: Redleaf Press.
6. Holmes, A. (2015, Summer). Communities of Practice: A Pedagogical Approach to Professional Learning. *eceLINK*. Toronto: Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario.
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Resources

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