Communities of Practice

How social learning is transforming professional development

participate
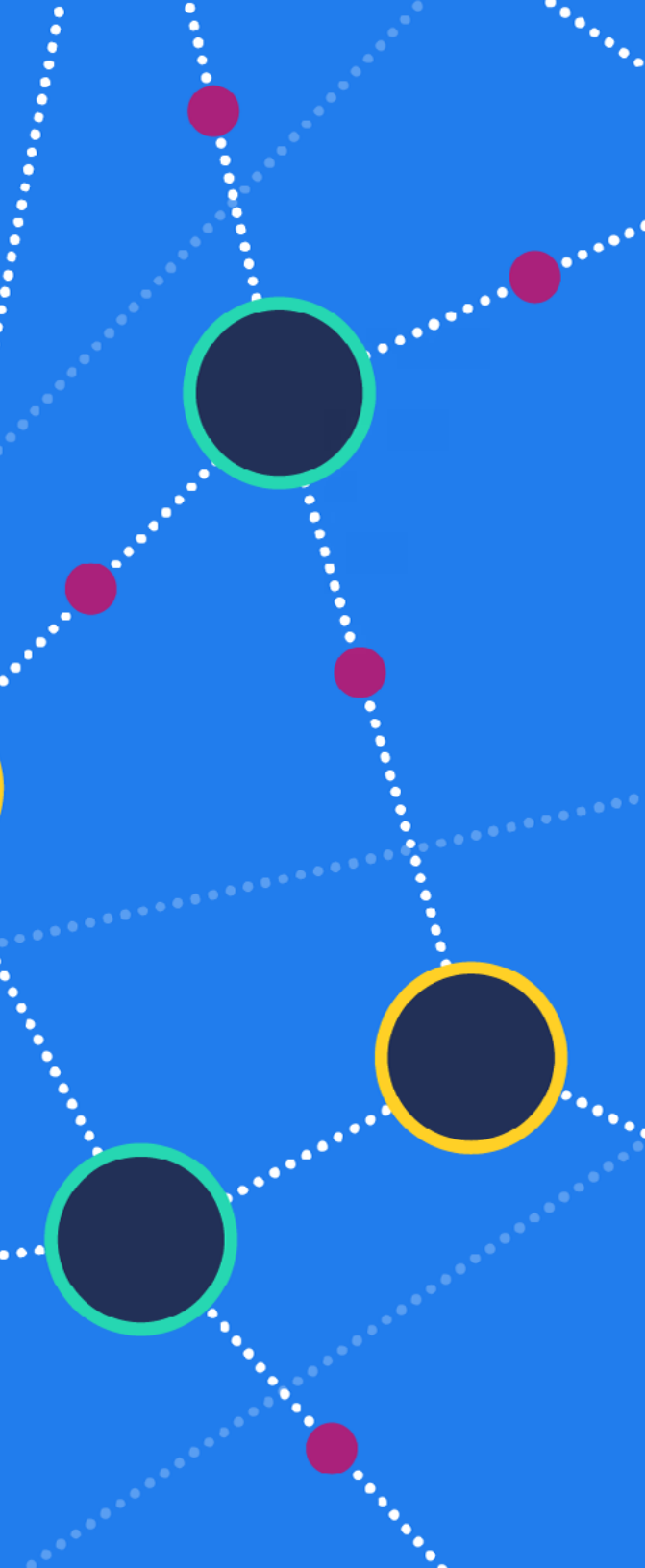
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1. What are communities of practice (CoPs)?

According to Wenger-Trayner, "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."

Communities of practice are a key component of effective professional development because learning is a social activity.

THERE ARE THREE COMPONENTS OF CoPs:

1. THE DOMAIN:

Any CoP is defined by a common interest and focus. It is not just a group of people who like the same thing or have the same tastes—there is a shared purpose.

2. THE COMMUNITY:

The shared purpose brings together a group of people that engage in collaborative work and cooperation through sharing resources and ideas. Learners in these communities build sustained relationships and take on shared responsibilities.
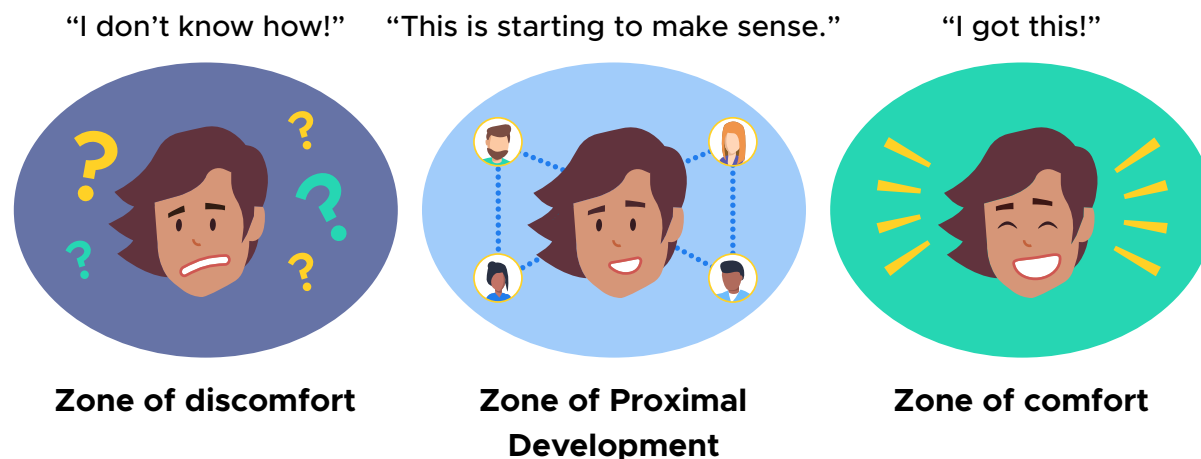
3. THE PRACTICE:

CoPs are more than just a group of people who chat about a shared interest. These are not isolated groups of people that share resources once, or even twice. They are intentional, ongoing and collaborative.

2. The evidence and theory behind communities of practice

THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

The knowledge that learning is a social process was not always a shared understanding. **The Zone of Proximal Development** was a groundbreaking theory when first proposed by Lev Vygotsky in 1938. It is defined as "the distance between the actual development level as documented by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or a more experienced peer."

Vygotsky argued that human development occurs through social interaction and it is "through these interactions that humans 'make meaning.'" Applying this theory to learning environments ensures that peer learning is elevated because **"nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning."**

"I don't know how!" "This is starting to make sense." "I got this!"

Zone of discomfort **Zone of Proximal Development** **Zone of comfort**

Vygotsky argued that human development occurs through social interaction and it is "through these interactions that humans 'make meaning.'"

> **"Teachers are always in a continuous process of transition between an <u>Inner Loop of focused study and guided investigation and an Outer Loop</u> of exploration and discovery. The Loops do not always represent places or resources. The Loops are patterns of interaction around the learning that teachers do."**
>
> – Simon Terry

INNER AND OUTER LOOPS OF CONNECTED LEARNING

A **<u>connected and participatory learning</u>** approach builds upon this notion of social learning and is the heart of any effective CoP.
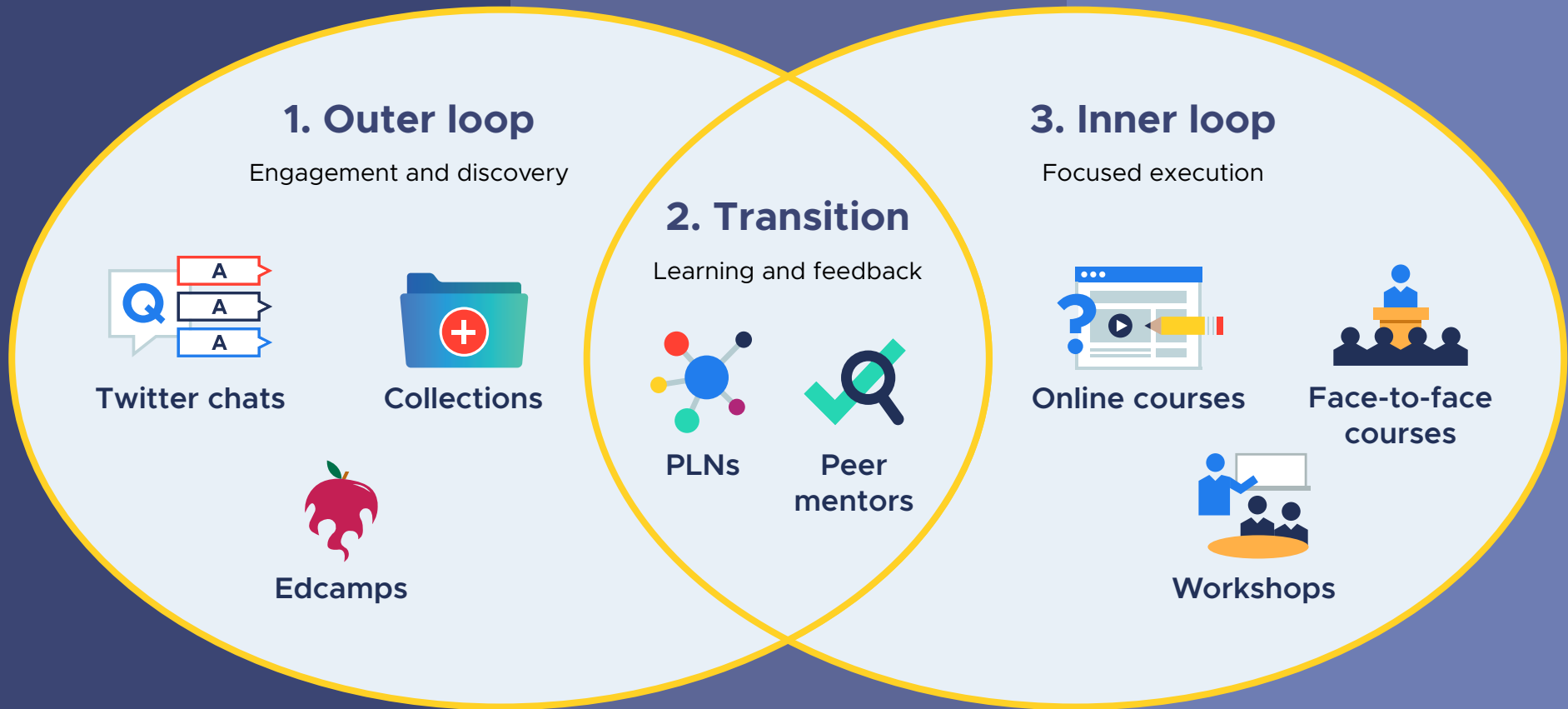
CoPs cut across informal and formal learning contexts as learning happens anywhere and everywhere.

The defining characteristic of a CoP is a sustained community.

Whether professional development is offered by a district, a school or designed by educators, it must create innovative, fluid environments that provide teachers structured and unstructured learning opportunities to explore, investigate and connect.

In each loop, peer collaboration and cooperation are essential components. Drawing again from Vygotsky, learning is social and often relies on the **<u>more knowledgeable other</u>** (MKO). This can be a colleague, a peer mentor, an expert or a structured course.

1. Outer loop

Engagement and discovery

Twitter chats

Collections

Edcamps

2. Transition

Learning and feedback

PLNs

Peer mentors

3. Inner loop

Focused execution

Online courses

Face-to-face courses

Workshops

1. OUTER LOOP:

The Outer Loop is where the learner engages in exploration and discovery. This can be pursued based on interest, experience and prior knowledge. These explorations can be open-ended and can include, but are not limited to, Twitter chats, Edcamps and face-to-face conversation.

2. TRANSITION:

Connecting, and within, these two loops is where learners find mentors and engage in more intensive one-to-one interaction. Peer feedback and coaching are critical components.

3. INNER LOOP:

The Inner Loop represents more intensive structured and formal learning that provides access and exposure to larger domains of knowledge.

PARTICIPATORY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In 2012, as part of a working series on digital media and learning, the **USC Annenberg Innovation Lab** released a comprehensive research report, **Participatory Professional Development**, providing case studies that illustrated how models and theories of connected and participatory learning need to be applied to professional development.

Each case study highlights how teachers designed learning experiences together, connected to experts when needed and modeled practices they want to apply in their classrooms with students.
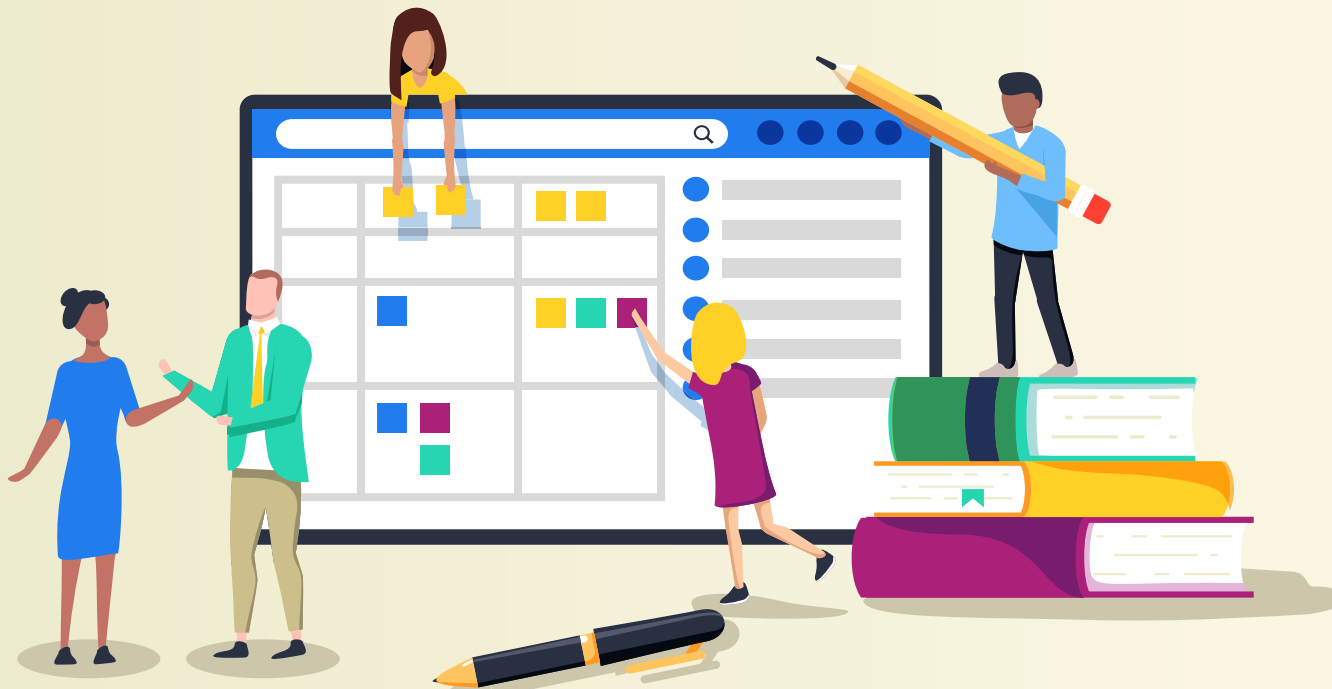
Findings

Across the case studies, researchers found common design features that ensure:

- Inquiry is at the core.

- Learners co-investigate and develop new understandings together.

- Prior experience is privileged, honored and extended, providing all learners with diversity of perspectives.

- Learning experiences are built upon sociocultural theory that posits all humans develop and learn through social interactions, framed by cultural contexts.

Multiple studies, **some almost a decade old**, have documented the effectiveness of online CoPs, with benefits such as:

- Sustaining changes in teaching practice over time

- Allowing more equitable access to new knowledge and pedagogical strategies

- Providing needed extension to face-to-face learning experiences that are often isolated and disconnected from teachers' everyday working environments

- Successfully integrating into a holistic and comprehensive professional development program

- Supporting multiple cycles of **presentation, integration and reflection on learned knowledge**

Rapid developments of new technologies have amplified the social nature of learning.

Critical advances in learning theory provide needed frameworks to better understand this impact. For example, **connectivism** and **mlearning theories** build upon connected and participatory learning models. Each offers a comprehensive lens to better understand and explain the fluid nature of this learning.

These highlight the prominence of informal learning and new technologies that change the speed and ability for learners to connect with each other, experts and resources.

"We can no longer **personally experience and acquire [all the] learning that we need to act**. We derive our competence from forming connections."

— George Siemens

How are teachers utilizing Twitter to form CoPs? Are all educator Twitter chats CoPs?

It depends on the hashtag. **In recent studies**, sustained and collaborative teacher learning has been documented in subject-specific synchronous and asynchronous Twitter chats. Specific hashtags, such as **#participatementors**, **#collaborativePD**, **#badgechat** and **#sschat** often bring together the same community of educators over time during a synchronous chat held weekly or monthly.

Conversations are ongoing and moderators are able to facilitate conversations around practices that are not isolated incidents of resource sharing, but rather provide evidence of sustained collaboration around practices. This also demonstrates a "bridging function that teachers use 'as **a way of importing new ideas** into their local communities of practice from distant peers.'"

3. Twitter chats: New spaces and tools for CoPs

Educators' use of Twitter is an excellent example of how new social media tools and environments are used to build CoPs.

This grassroots professional development movement is participatory and connected, further demonstrating the power of social learning.

Educators primarily use synchronous and asynchronous chats organized around specific hashtags to **work together towards a common goal and to share ideas resources, practices and tools**. It is also being used to reduce isolation and build professional learning networks, both inside and beyond schools.
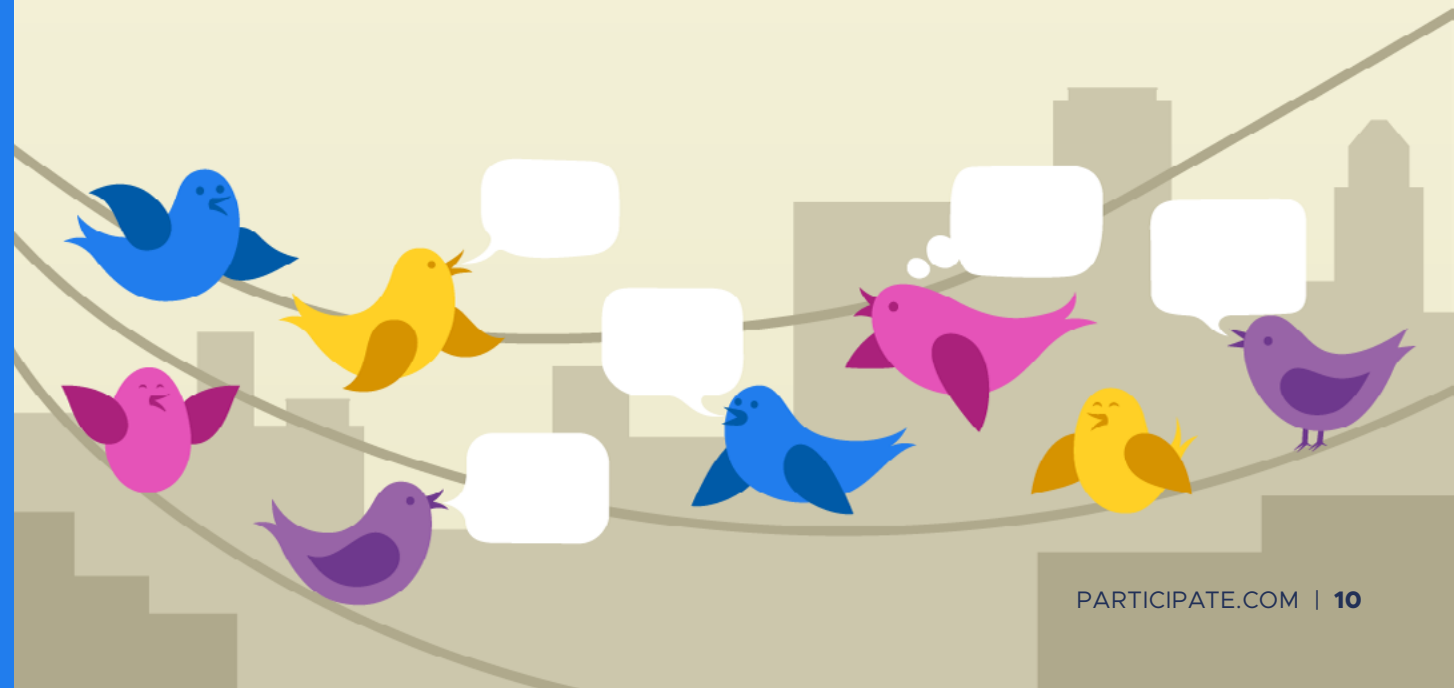
A specific example is #participatementors, a community of peer mentors that meet via Twitter to discuss best practices in peer review and coaching. This asynchronous slow chat focuses on methods, resources and strategies related to online peer review, a key design feature of Participate digital badges.

This chat brings together a core group of educators and fits the definition of a CoP outlined by Wenger-Trayner. Using the CoP framework allows researchers and educators to understand the use of synchronous and asynchronous chats as a key component of a dynamic and connected professional learning ecosystem.

4. Why educators need social learning

The need for radical changes in professional development is a direct result of the rapid and transformative technological and societal changes that demand new learning models in the classroom.

New advances in machine learning and in augmented and virtual reality will completely alter what is needed for college and career readiness. A focus on social/emotional learning, new and advanced media and digital literacy skills, computational thinking, inter- and trans-disciplinary thinking, cross-cultural competence and collaboration are all critical for student success. Teachers need to develop these same skills and need ongoing opportunities to build and join CoPs for both formal and informal learning.

Teachers rely on peer networks, whether they are grade-level PLCs (professional learning communities) or online CoPs, depending on interests and professional learning goals. Yet, we still find too many educators learning in isolation and unable to find recognition for the formal and informal learning they do in their CoPs.

Professional development models and programs need to incorporate best practices in connected and participatory learning theory. This requires that CoPs are placed at the center of any professional development initiative to ensure accessibility to every educator.

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Learn more

If you are interested in developing communities of practice within your professional learning programs, contact us at **communities@participate.com** to schedule a demo—we'd love to work with you.

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