



PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The updated [position statement *Professional Support, Supervision and Mentoring*](#) expanded SPA's definition of various support partnerships. One of these newly defined partnerships are **Communities of Practice (CoP)**. A CoP involves a group of practitioners who engage in a collective learning experience. SPA members may meet the [Certification Program's professional support](#) requirement when they participate in a relevant CoP.

Group learning is not new and is not uncommon. We participate in various types of CoPs in our personal and professional lives related to hobbies, learning networks, journal clubs, etc. The term 'Communities of Practice' is relatively recent. It originated from cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger, who described [essential characteristics of CoPs](#). These include...

Domain:

This is a shared area of interest. Members of the community share a commitment to competence in the domain.

Community:

Members engage, learn from, and support one another as they pursue their interest in the domain.

Practice:

Members act on their interest. They "develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice," (Wenger-Treyner, 2015).

Communities of Practice can be organised in a range of ways. They might be established by an employer, a professional development provider, or by the participants themselves. Decision-making may be shared equally in the community or there could be members with clear leadership roles.

A community might have a few members or many participants. Learning might be facilitated by members with more experience or knowledge, or participants with similar experience could work together to learn and solve problems.



Although Communities of Practice might exist informally, it is important for speech pathologists engaging in professional support to create CoPs using some formal processes. These can help the community operate effectively and support learning. It can also assist the CoP to meet requirements of the SPA Certification Program.

The **Association's professional support templates** include a Community of Practice Charter, or foundational document for the CoP. This provides a framework for members to define the three characteristics of their Community of Practice. This includes...

Domain

- What is the **purpose** of the community? What area of interest can members expect to learn about? What value will it add to speech pathologists and those they provide services to?
- What are the community's **objectives**? What knowledge or skills will be obtained? What actions will the community participate in?

Community:

- Who are the **members** of the community? What are the criteria for someone to participate?
- What are the **expectations** of community members?

Practice:

- Are there specific **roles** required to operate the community? Who will fulfil these roles and how?
- What **ways of working** will the community use to operate and communicate? How and how frequently will members meet?
- What level of **confidentiality** is required for the community to operate safely? What are the limits to confidentiality and how will that be managed?
- How will the community manage **record keeping**?
- What systems will be used to **evaluate** how learning occurs and how the community operates?

In some cases, community members might seek guidance related to specific clients or discuss case examples. CoPs should have guidelines to manage these discussions in a safe and ethical way.

Consider:

- the size of the group
- how group communication occurs
- the relevant experience of other participants
- risks to privacy
- validity of information that is shared.

If it is appropriate to discuss specific cases, service user information should be de-identified and they should consent to their case being discussed in this forum.

You can learn more about Communities of Practice from the [originators of this concept, Bev and Étienne Wenger-Trayner](#). You can also hear from organisers of [a successful speech pathology CoP on the Speak Up podcast](#). SPA's professional support advisor can also provide you with information: psa@speechpathologyaustralia.org.au.

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