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1 **Teaching Tip: Setting Up and Running Online Communities of Practice (CoPs) for Veterinary**  
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32 **ABSTRACT**

33 Communities of practice (CoPs) are social systems consisting of individuals who come together to  
34 share knowledge and solve problems around a common interest. For educators, membership of a  
35 CoP can facilitate access to expertise and professional development activities and generate new  
36 collaborations. This teaching tip focuses on online CoPs and provides tips for setting up and running  
37 such communities. The initial planning phase involves establishing the purpose of the CoP, recruiting  
38 an administrative team, designing the structure of the online environment, and choosing a platform.  
39 Once the online platform is launched, running the CoP involves building the membership,  
40 encouraging engagement (primarily in discussion forums), finding ways to create and share useful  
41 resources, and sustaining the community as an active and effective CoP. We also describe a specific  
42 example of an online CoP for veterinary educators involved in clinical skills teaching. The  
43 membership has grown to represent an international community who engage in a range of activities  
44 including sharing knowledge, tips and ideas, asking questions, discussing challenges and promoting  
45 collaborative activities.

46 **KEYWORDS**

47 Community of practice, clinical skills, collaboration, veterinary education, online communities

## 48 INTRODUCTION

49 The idea of a community of practice (CoP) was first explored over thirty years ago.<sup>1</sup> A CoP is an  
50 example of social learning, where members are informally brought together by a 'common interest'  
51 and build collaborative relationships, learn from each other and benefit from the collective expertise  
52 within the community.<sup>2,3</sup> Membership of a CoP is self-selected and participants can choose to join  
53 the community, unlike more formal organizations where managers select team members who are  
54 beholden to them.<sup>4</sup> Members will share knowledge and expertise, discuss and solve problems,  
55 transfer best practices, and develop their own professional skills.<sup>5</sup> CoPs typically start with a few  
56 core members, who may be experts in the field and/or enthusiasts for the topic and tend to lead  
57 most of the activities, at least initially. As other members join some will contribute to discussions,  
58 but most tend to remain on the periphery as observers.<sup>6,7</sup>

59 Although initially described as a face-to-face community, it has naturally developed to fit within the  
60 digital world. Wenger indicated that the rise of social media is well aligned to fitting in with CoPs.<sup>2</sup> By  
61 use of a dedicated online platform, the members of the community can actively engage with and  
62 support each other in achieving a common goal.<sup>8</sup> In online knowledge-sharing CoPs, members need  
63 to be willing to put forward ideas, trust each other and accept the CoP as a valuable source of  
64 information.<sup>9,10</sup> An online presence for a CoP also enables participation from members of the  
65 worldwide community, who may have otherwise been unable to collaborate through geographical  
66 isolation or financial limitations.<sup>11,12</sup> The activity within online communities is asynchronous and  
67 therefore can support engagement irrespective of time zone differences.

68 In many areas of education, including the health professions, CoPs have been used to enhance  
69 professional and faculty development through informal group learning and opportunities for  
70 collaboration, with mentorship often developing during these discussions.<sup>13-18</sup> Social media  
71 platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, are increasingly adopted by educators to form  
72 CoPs and provide ready access to specialist knowledge and opportunities to engage in scholarship  
73 and build collaborations.<sup>19-22</sup> Online CoPs also complement other forms of knowledge exchange,  
74 such as more expensive and infrequent meetings at conferences.<sup>12,23</sup> One of the challenges  
75 associated with membership of any CoP is the time required to engage in an additional activity on  
76 top of an already busy workload. However, the time commitment is mitigated to some extent in  
77 online CoPs by the ease of access to information, being able to keep up to date and a sense of  
78 community.<sup>24,25</sup>

79 In the veterinary context, an example of an online CoP that aimed to support educators' continuing  
80 professional development was the Network Of Veterinary ICT in Education (NOVICE) project, funded

81 under the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union.<sup>26,27</sup> Other online veterinary CoPs  
82 have emerged to support professional groups in sharing clinical expertise, discussing work-related  
83 challenges, and career development (e.g., Vets: Stay, Go, Diversify; Veterinary Voices; AAVMC's  
84 Connect platform). Some have been specifically designed to support students, for example with  
85 clinicians facilitating case discussion on Twitter using a hashtag #VetFinals.<sup>28</sup> VetEd, an annual  
86 conference dedicated to growing the veterinary education community, has embodied many of the  
87 principles of a CoP.<sup>29</sup> The original intent was to promote best practices by sharing expertise,  
88 innovation, and ideas in an inclusive community. The resulting benefits have included bringing  
89 together and growing a community, sharing knowledge and generating new ideas. These align with  
90 the benefits identified for CoPs supporting faculty development in medical education.<sup>17,29</sup>

91 In creating this teaching tip, the authors have drawn upon the literature on CoPs and the team's  
92 experiences participating in and running online communities. The aim is to provide a series of tips to  
93 act as guidance for veterinary educators interested in setting up and running an online CoP. We also  
94 describe an example of an online CoP, 'Veterinary Clinical Skills + Simulation'<sup>a</sup> which was set up in  
95 May 2020 and has grown into a successful, knowledge sharing, collaborative international  
96 community.

## 97 **TIPS FOR SETTING UP AND RUNNING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE (CoP)**

98 The principles behind creating an online CoP remain largely the same, whether it is for advancement  
99 of veterinary educators, medical educators, or other contexts such as business development and  
100 computer science.<sup>4,5,7,8</sup>

### 101 **PREPARATION - SETTING UP THE ONLINE CoP**

#### 102 **1. *Establish the purpose***

103 It is important to consider why the CoP is being developed -essentially its purpose. A basic model on  
104 which a CoP is built embodies three structural elements; a *domain* of knowledge or area of interest  
105 defining the purpose, a *community* of people who value the domain, and their shared *practice* which  
106 constitutes the discussion of ideas and community's activities.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the first step is to  
107 establish the purpose, which is often obvious to the team planning to set up the CoP but may be less  
108 clear to others, including potential members. Clarifying the purpose enables the team to create the  
109 boundaries of the CoP, identify the target community (membership), define the topics worth  
110 sharing, how best to present ideas, and which activities to pursue.<sup>5</sup> It is important to be able to  
111 articulate the need for the CoP and what it will offer its members. Imagining the perspective of those  
112 who might want to join and what they will want from it can be helpful in refining and justifying the  
113 purpose because without its community the CoP will not succeed. Writing a statement about the

114 CoP and its purpose is a valuable exercise for the team and should be included in the publicly  
115 available information for potential members. In a veterinary context, the purpose of the CoP can be  
116 quite broad, for instance, 'the veterinary workplace' or be focused to a particular field, such as a  
117 specific topic (e.g. feline medicine) or an area of education.

## 118 **2. Assemble the administrative team**

119 An administrative team will be needed and will have responsibility for the various tasks associated  
120 with setting up and running the CoP. There may be sufficient capacity within the initial team but  
121 typically extra tasks emerge, or specialist skills are required e.g., technical, and further members  
122 need to be recruited. Usually the team members are volunteers and perform administrative tasks  
123 alongside their normal work commitments, so being clear about the tasks, expectations and amount  
124 of time required is important. Team members should be passionate about the topic, preferably with  
125 relevant expertise, and comfortable interacting in an online environment. Another valuable  
126 characteristic is being a reflective practitioner who is prepared to adapt as the community evolves  
127 and changes.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the team's existing skills and prior experience, it is helpful to provide  
128 clarity around roles and training for certain tasks such as moderating online discussions. In a  
129 veterinary education CoP, there will likely be the need for specific expertise of veterinarians and  
130 educators, but outside help may also be useful in the form of non-veterinary technical support.

## 131 **3. Define the structure of the online platform**

132 The structure of the online platform needs to be planned before it is implemented to ensure it will  
133 support the activities of the online CoP. Sections within the platform typically include publicly  
134 available pages explaining the purpose of the CoP, how to register as a member, contact information  
135 for the administrative team, and the data protection policy. The membership-only area usually  
136 includes sections for discussions, members' profiles, house rules, and other useful information often  
137 framed as 'frequently asked questions' (FAQs). Once the sections have been identified, more  
138 detailed requirements need to be defined. An example of an online CoP's structure is shown in  
139 Figure 1.

140 *About here Figure 1: An example structure for the design of an online CoP*

141 The core of an online CoP lies in its *discussions*. Discussions are key to enable the sharing of  
142 information, ideas and advice.<sup>5,9,13,17</sup> These discussions are typically hosted on forums set out in  
143 broad topics. Within each forum, members start discussions with a post and other members respond  
144 with comments. Decisions need to be made around whether new forums can be created by  
145 members or only by the administrative team. Both are acceptable options, but more administrative  
146 control of forums tends to lead to a tidier layout with less duplication and is easier to search. Other

147 considerations include whether a post could be made anonymously, the circumstances under which  
148 pre-approval of a post may be required, and how a post could be taken down or comments on a  
149 thread closed. Another consideration is how notifications of posts will be handled; do members  
150 need to be logged into the system to see a post or will automatic messages (e.g., emails) be sent out  
151 and if so, are these on an opt-in or opt-out basis? The discussion content should be easy to search to  
152 help members find relevant information, including previous posts that have answered a question.

153 The *membership* process will involve a number of steps, including a registration form, a system to  
154 approve new members and associated messaging (emails). Criteria for membership should be stated  
155 in the publicly available information, and the administrative team need to decide if and how  
156 eligibility will be checked and when provision of further details will be required. Once members are  
157 approved, a welcome message explaining how to use the platform can be useful in encouraging new  
158 members to explore the site and participate in the community.

159 *House rules* are important and should be easy for members to find; making the expectations clear at  
160 the outset can help to avoid the need for administrators to remove posts or warn or remove  
161 members. There are examples of house rules from existing communities, and these can act as a basis  
162 on which to create a CoP's specific rules. Some rules are generic and relate to accepted behavior in  
163 online posts while others may be more specific to the context.<sup>16</sup> Examples of points to include are:

- 164 • Being kind and respectful within the community to help foster a friendly and sharing  
165 atmosphere.
- 166 • Adhering to widely accepted 'netiquette' (internet good behavior) e.g., avoid 'flaming' (insulting  
167 comments), 'shouting' (using all capital letters), etc.
- 168 • Checking copyright before posting documents e.g., papers, images, etc.
- 169 • Before using information posted by other members, gaining permission and acknowledging  
170 authorship as appropriate.
- 171 • Contacting the administrative team with questions or concern about activities within the CoP.
- 172 • Administrative team reserving the right to moderate posts and discussions.
- 173 • Writing with clarity and avoiding jargon, etc. to facilitate all members reading posts (especially  
174 for international CoPs when some members will not have English as a first language).
- 175 • Advertising and potential commercial use of the site: clarifying what members are or are not  
176 allowed to post.

177 Drawing attention to house rules in the membership acceptance message is recommended.

178 Another useful section is *FAQs*. It is often pre-populated with questions and answers related to the  
179 purpose of the CoP and how to use the discussion forums, manage your account and contact the

180 administration team, and will link to other relevant sections. The FAQs are likely to expand over time  
181 and are a useful way to address common questions that arise.

#### 182 **4. Choose the online platform**

183 The choice of the online platform will depend on the structure and functionalities that need to be  
184 supported (as defined in 3 above) and whether the requirements can be met by a platform's  
185 available template/s. Some have limited customization e.g. Facebook, while others allow more  
186 control over the layout which may be preferred e.g., WordPress. The skills required to set up and run  
187 a more customizable platform may be beyond those of the team and need to be outsourced. If the  
188 CoP is within an organization e.g., a university, the virtual learning environment may support the  
189 required functions (through in-built discussion boards, wikis, file sharing etc.). However, that option  
190 may not be suitable if the community is expected to extend beyond that organization i.e., requiring  
191 external membership and access. The platform's ease of use, for both administrators and members,  
192 is an important consideration as it can affect engagement and the overall effectiveness of a CoP.<sup>31</sup>  
193 One of the benefits of an online CoP is the repository of information that is built over time,<sup>17</sup> but the  
194 associated server space required may have an additional cost. Some hosting services provide 'free'  
195 storage but may own the data (or information) that users generate on that platform. The CoP may  
196 also need a domain name for the website, which involves finding a suitable name and registering it.  
197 There will be an associated initial and ongoing monthly cost to maintain the platform, which can  
198 range from \$10-20, or more if a lot of server space is required. **RUNNING THE ONLINE CoP**

#### 199 **5. Start and grow the community membership**

200 The members are at the core of any CoP, and part of its success will depend on recruitment and  
201 ongoing growth of the community. Various approaches can be used; initially the administrative team  
202 can reach out to people known to be interested in the topic and should publicize the new  
203 community via relevant networks, which may be in person e.g., at conferences, or online e.g., via  
204 listservs, internal to an organization, national, international, or professional depending on the CoP's  
205 context. Further growth often follows a snowballing effect where existing members help to spread  
206 the word and recruit more members.

#### 207 **6. Encourage activity**

208 Encouraging activity within the discussion forums is essential for members to start topics and for  
209 others to post replies.<sup>16</sup> Members of a CoP mostly fall into the category of 'lurkers',<sup>32</sup> who will read  
210 posts but do not add to discussions. Newcomers to a CoP often sit at the periphery but as they gain  
211 'mastery' of a subject may choose to participate more and move towards the center, becoming  
212 involved in discussions.<sup>6,7</sup> The administrative team can have a role in encouraging participation by



213 starting a topic, responding to a post, or stimulating activity by contacting other community  
214 members known to have relevant expertise and asking them to add to the discussion. Members are  
215 more likely to share knowledge in the CoP once they feel the information will not be misused (for  
216 example to advance a personal agenda at the expense of other members).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, when  
217 members trust the CoP as a source of reliable information, they will be more willing to engage.<sup>9</sup> An  
218 important characteristic of administrators is to model a culture of trust in their own online  
219 activities.<sup>10,33</sup> Administrators can inadvertently close a discussion as they may be seen as having the  
220 final 'say' or being the authority on the topic. Sometimes the CoP goes quiet for a period, it can  
221 seem as if a post has been 'lost in the ether' when no one replies. At such times, alternative activities  
222 such as sending out a community-wide newsletter, highlighting recent interesting discussions or  
223 setting up a poll for members to vote on a topic, can provide an easy way to re-engage. It is  
224 acknowledged that time for engagement can be a challenge, but due to the asynchronous nature of  
225 online CoPs, members have the flexibility to participate in the discussions when it is most convenient  
226 for them.

## 227 **7. Create and share resources**

228 In addition to the information shared within the discussion forums, a community will often find  
229 other ways to share resources and knowledge and create artifacts. In an academic context, examples  
230 might be a repository of shareable teaching materials and a bibliography of relevant journal papers.  
231 Consideration needs to be given to how and where the materials will be stored, adherence to  
232 copyright regulations, and how members will be able to easily search for and find what they are  
233 interested in. Options include using a page on the platform, a membership-based (login) repository,  
234 or a publicly accessible spreadsheet that indexes the resources e.g., a Google sheet.

235 Some CoPs will also provide extra activities for the community members. For example, online  
236 webinars with presentations from experts in the field (from within or beyond the CoP) and sessions  
237 that showcase innovative work or research studies undertaken by CoP members. Other ways to  
238 support the community's needs include online workshops and mentoring schemes.

## 239 **8. Sustainability**

240 One of the challenges can be ensuring the sustainability of the CoP. This involves keeping it fresh,  
241 active, and relevant, and adapting to the ongoing needs of the community. This is important as some  
242 CoPs have a limited lifespan, for example when coming together to solve a particular problem or  
243 achieve a specific short-term goal.<sup>34</sup> The long-term success of a CoP depends on the continued  
244 development of the membership's knowledge base and skills, and retaining and expanding the

245 membership.<sup>4</sup> There are various approaches the administrative team can consider.<sup>17</sup> Examples  
246 include:

- 247 • Communicate the CoP's successes, such as membership number milestones and the knowledge  
248 and resources generated by the community, as these are effectively achievements of the CoP  
249 and its members.
- 250 • Gather feedback from the community e.g., via a survey, to identify what is valued by members,  
251 new topics to explore, whether other activities would be of interest and should be provided, and  
252 if there are any issues preventing engagement with the community's activities.
- 253 • Continue to recruit new members as they will bring new ideas.
- 254 • Continue to publicize the community through networks and at conferences.
- 255 • Consider offering 'treats' from time to time such as a keynote speaker via a webinar.

### 256 **AN EXAMPLE: VETERINARY CLINICAL SKILLS + SIMULATION**

257 'Veterinary Clinical Skills + Simulation'<sup>a</sup> is an online CoP for veterinary educators who are involved in  
258 veterinary clinical skills education, teaching, assessment and developing learning resources including  
259 models (Figure 2). Within the CoP, members can share knowledge, tips and ideas, ask questions,  
260 discuss challenges and promote collaborative activities. The CoP aligns with Wenger's structural  
261 elements (Table 1) having a defined area of interest (domain) around which the membership forms  
262 (community) and engages in relevant activities (practice).<sup>5</sup>

263 *About here Figure 2: The Veterinary Clinical Skills + Simulation online community of practice*  
264 *homepage*

265 *About here Table 1: Alignment of the Veterinary Clinical Skills + Simulation online group with the*  
266 *Wenger's structural elements of a community of practice (CoP)<sup>5</sup>*

267 In 2019, a small team (authors SB, TK and NF), who had previously been involved in an online CoP  
268 project (NOVICE)<sup>26,27</sup> began to plan a specific CoP for clinical skills enthusiasts, as the NOVICE  
269 software platform that had supported a similar group was about to become obsolete. After  
270 reviewing various existing online CoPs and software options, WordPress<sup>b</sup> and its plugin for forums  
271 (bbPress) were chosen as the best option for the CoP's requirements, and a hosting package and  
272 domain name<sup>a</sup> were selected. The CoP is free to members and hosting costs are supported by a  
273 small annual private charitable donation. The features provided within the platform include a  
274 publicly accessible 'about' page with an overview of the community's aims, house rules and a link to  
275 a 'contact us' form; membership application (with an approval process to check the individual's  
276 eligibility e.g., using institutional websites and search engines); a frequently asked questions ('FAQs')  
277 page; and forums where members can initiate and reply to posts. The online platform was launched

278 in May 2020, which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and, although not intentionally timed,  
279 allowed people to continue to come together as a community at a time when conferences and other  
280 in-person meetings were cancelled. The administrative team was expanded to six in June 2020 (co-  
281 authors PS, RP and HJ) and to eight in February 2022 (co-authors JR and EM).

282 Within two and a half years the community has grown to over 600 members representing nearly 100  
283 universities and colleges from over 40 countries across the world, and the community continues to  
284 grow with 32 new members joining in the first two months of 2023. There are eight forums including  
285 topics focused on clinical skills models, online teaching, assessment, conferences and events, and  
286 educational research; the latter was added upon request in February 2022 and has generated new  
287 activity and ways for members to collaborate. There is regular activity with an average of seven  
288 posts per week. Posts typically start with someone asking a question e.g., about making or buying a  
289 model, which is followed by other community members providing tips and advice. The posts have  
290 demonstrated the community's kindness, support for others and willingness to share expertise. The  
291 forums are also used to announce upcoming conferences and advertise jobs within the veterinary or  
292 the broader health professions education sector. There has been a reasonable level of engagement  
293 with a third (33%) of members having written posts. In other CoPs it is more typical for most  
294 members to 'lurk' and remain on the periphery,<sup>6,7,32</sup> and some CoPs have reported levels of  
295 participation in large communities as low <1%.<sup>7</sup> The clinical skills CoP may have benefitted from the  
296 overall increase in members' technical and online skills seen across higher education as a result of  
297 the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>35</sup>

298 As an added extra for the community, regular free webinars have been offered since July 2020.  
299 These typically last for one hour with either multiple short talks e.g., how to make a model, or  
300 slightly longer talks on other clinical skills education topics e.g., online teaching, assessment, and  
301 research studies. Time is always allocated for questions and discussion. There have been over 60  
302 talks with attendance averaging around 50 members, although there have occasionally been nearly  
303 100 attendees. Another popular offering has been online workshops using breakout rooms for group  
304 tasks and discussion; workshops are typically limited to 25 participants. Members join from many  
305 time zones (from the west coast of North America to New Zealand) and the slides and audio  
306 recordings are shared on the platform afterwards. An additional benefit has been the creation of  
307 online repositories of resources including videos for teaching clinical skills<sup>36</sup> and a bibliography of  
308 journal papers relevant to veterinary clinical skills.<sup>37</sup>

309 In summary, the team's reflections and top tips are:

- 310 • Build a team who have a passion for the topic; it makes the time commitment less burdensome  
311 and involvement more enjoyable.

- 312 • Proactively manage membership; set up a verification process, have clear email messages  
313 including an initial welcome with information about getting started and using the site.
- 314 • Find ways to minimize team workload e.g., automate as much as possible, update FAQs to  
315 answer common member queries.
- 316 • Do not worry if the community goes quiet for a period. The silence is often broken by a flurry of  
317 activity! But have a few topics in reserve ready to post to stimulate activity when required.

## 318 **CONCLUSION**

319 Setting up and running online CoPs is not a trivial undertaking and involves a commitment from the  
320 administrative team, mostly behind the scenes, and a community willing to engage; it does not just  
321 happen. Careful planning followed by strategic activities help to sustain membership growth and  
322 encourage discussion, and the ongoing generation of a relevant body of knowledge. Veterinary  
323 clinical skills educators have demonstrated that when a group of individuals strongly identify around  
324 a domain, an online CoP with a truly international membership can be built to support knowledge  
325 sharing and problem solving. Encouragingly, the members continue to be willing to actively  
326 contribute and provide tips and advice while further expanding the community's knowledge base  
327 and resources.

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332 Conflict of interest statement: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

## 333 **NOTES**

- 334 a. Veterinary Clinical Skills + Simulation: <https://www.clinicalskillsandsimulation.com/>  
335 b. WordPress: <https://en-gb.wordpress.org/>

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439 **Table 1: Alignment of the Veterinary Clinical Skills + Simulation online group with the Wenger's**  
 440 **structural elements of a community of practice (CoP)<sup>5</sup>**

Structural elements of a CoP	Description for the 'Veterinary Clinical Skills + Simulation' CoP
Domain - overarching area of interest and knowledge	Area of interest: teaching, learning and assessing veterinary clinical skills, including developing models and simulations
Community - the membership coming together around the area of interest	The community: 'Veterinary Clinical Skills & Simulation' group; members are veterinary educators involved in any aspect of veterinary clinical skills teaching
Practice – activities that build the knowledge within the CoP	The group's activities: sharing tips and ideas for teaching, learning and assessing clinical skills; discussing challenges and trying to identify solutions; finding ways to collaborate and work together

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