
RED COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

A Tip Sheet from Revolutionizing Engineering Departments (RED) Participatory Action Research

The work of academic change makers is often framed as an effort that creates impact on stakeholders, such as students, faculty, and others, in the form of new curricula, revised departmental practices, etc. Additionally, as a result of their on National Science Foundation RED projects, RED project team members also experience a positive impact through their participation in a community of practice (CoP). A community of practice is defined by Wenger as follows:

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. (Wenger 2011)

More than just a collection of individuals who possess a shared interest, a community of practice is characterized by several distinct features: they are practitioners; they develop a shared repertoire of resources (such as experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems) that represent their shared practice; and they develop their community over time and as a result of sustained interaction (Wenger 2011). This Tip Sheet focuses on the features of the CoP that RED team members engage with, and argues for the benefits of establishing a CoP in an academic change project. This Tip Sheet uses research findings resulting from focus group discussions, conference calls, and a survey with the National Science Foundation RED grantees. Contact us at grp_redpar@rose-hulman.edu for additional information.

As members of the RED Consortium, RED team members interact through regular online discussions and an annual consortium meeting. Through these interactions, RED teams, located across the country and spanning multiple disciplines, learn about the work of other teams and adopt new practices into their own projects. The RED CoP has also resulted in collaborations and partnerships between teams, thus providing opportunities for teams to leverage their work and expand their influence. For example, one such collaboration resulted in a project focused on diversity/equity/inclusion. Finally, members of the RED CoP conduct their interactions as colleagues with a goal of producing mutual benefit for all members. Overall, our analysis of the RED CoP suggests a way to understand the impact of the RED program on the team members who participate in its CoP.

Adoption and Learning through the CoP

The research data collected with RED teams suggests that team members learn through their interactions as a CoP, and their learning can lead to the adoption of innovative practices developed by other teams. In addition, the RED team members can brainstorm ideas in a safe environment where others share similar concerns and interests. As a result, team members can benefit from developing ideas and obtaining feedback prior to implementation of their ideas. The CoP also provides a space that encourages sharing of ideas so other team members can adapt them to their own contexts, thus accelerating idea transfer and reducing workload.

→ **TIP:** Consider establishing a CoP early in the life of your academic change project and highlight the benefits of a CoP to both prospective team members and potential partners. The CoP provides access to diverse thinkers and individuals with a wide range of experiences from different disciplines.

“In the [RED Consortium meeting] with social scientists, we get to deal with challenges that others are also dealing with using the same concepts. It is nice to brainstorm with others who can respond and say, have you thought of this theory, etc.”

Collaborations and Partnerships

By their very nature, RED projects bring together team members representing a wide range of disciplines. The CoP facilitates collaboration and understanding between individual team members and across RED teams, through opportunities to share resources and advice, potentially leading to improved cross-disciplinary understanding. RED teams also see the importance of strategic partnerships, and they can leverage the CoP in order to connect and build relationships with peers.

➔ **TIP:** Academic change projects often require collaborators and partnerships in order to be successful. The CoP can function as the foundation for these relationships through sharing challenges and highlighting commonalities in each other's work.

“On the last day [of the RED Consortium Meeting], we talked about a special issue in a journal to have different cohorts publish papers on a variety of topics, and this could be one topic: how many of us are approaching the same problem from different angles and perspectives, how are each of use approaching the same general problem, how are we doing different assessments? We could also present it at a conference.”

Support and Collegiality within the CoP

Finally, we see important support and collegiality emerging in the context of the RED CoP. The CoP provides benefits that were not specifically expected when we began our work with RED teams, and not all RED teams experience these benefits to the same degree. For the RED teams on the whole, however, the CoP offers important support that can make the work of academic change more manageable and productive. A RED team member interviewed about their CoP provided the following insight:

“There’s a lot of brain wealth, for lack of a better phrase, in these groups, and I would absolutely suggest reaching out, you know, there’s a lot of expertise to be had. Whether it’s through that group or through the social scientists or education individuals that are associated with this group. So I would absolutely say reach out to your colleagues. I know that I am always very excited when anyone from RED reaches out to me. So I am extending this too, if you’re interested, definitely reach out.

Check out other REDPAR Tip Sheets that can help, available at academicchange.org/

- **Communicating Change**
- **Creating Shared Vision**
- **Creating Strategic Partnerships**
- **Forming and Developing**
- **Leadership Succession**
- **Starting a Change Project**

Material for this Tip Sheet is drawn from:

Wenger, E. 2011. Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction. <http://hdl.handle.net/1794/11736>

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