

Agricultural Education and Training Good Practices: Communities of Practice

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Developing and using online communities of practice in agricultural education and training

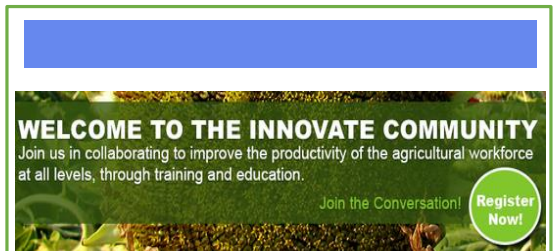
Communities of practice (CoP) often naturally exist within groups of professionals, where individual members develop collaborative relationships and experience a shared focus. In AET systems, the sharing of information and experiences through a CoP can foster growth and innovation for faculty, administration and students. Developing an online CoP further expands networks to cross geographic boundaries, an especially important technology for international development organizations.

Why are communities of practice important for AET?

Online communities of practice are not contingent on a specific location; rather they are formed around a group of people who share common knowledge and professional experiences. The electronic platform also provides a mechanism for participants to interact with others who would otherwise be too far away to meet and connect as professional colleagues. These characteristics allow meaningful dialogue to occur between practitioners around the world, an important aspect of improving AET systems through a mutual support network.

Ideas for adoption

- Use a web-based platform that functions on a variety of devices and systems to increase participation
- Conduct focus groups to collect positive and negative feedback about other online communities of practice
- Promote the community through multiple avenues to invite others i.e. word-of-mouth, e-mail listservs, and conferences
- Avoid using a CoP as a resource depository that lacks a dynamic space for active practitioner interactions and the establishment of relationships between participants
- Design the electronic community based on the fundamental social learning theories and principles of communities of practice



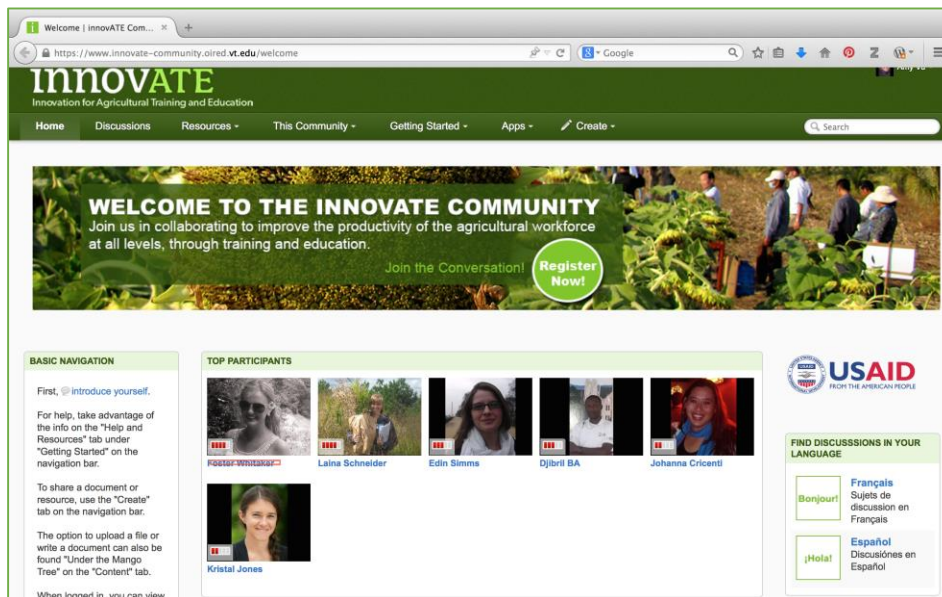
InnovATE Community

The Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education, and the InnovATE program at Virginia Tech have partnered to develop an online community of practice for international agriculture education and training practitioners. The creation of this virtual community allows agriculture educators to collaborate by sharing information, knowledge, and resources, thereby supporting both students, local practitioners, and the general public. Leading agriculture education experts are joining the community discussions from around the world. These discussions can be found at: www.innovate-community.oired.vt.edu

Challenges and Opportunities

Design and development of the online CoP must be based on fundamental principles. A number of electronic based CoP's do not integrate these principles and instead are simply using the CoP title as a 'catchy title' to market their group. The foundational principle is that the knowledge development occurs within the dynamic interactions/exchanges of the group members. Therefore, the design must deliberately foster *collaborative* interactions.

Design for the development of relationships *between* participants rather than individual participation through submission and use of educational program resource materials must be taken into consideration.



As there will be active and inactive members registered to the community of practice, it is important to examine why an individual may be inactive. Understanding if members are peripheral to the discussion because they are new to the group, or if they are marginally participating because of some limitation is important to meeting member needs and maximizing engagement. Membership will also include those that are experienced members of the community and those who are novices. A key factor to keep in mind when designing a CoP is ensuring there are ways to encourage collaboration between individuals with different levels of experience in AET. This can be done through creating topical groups, making experts moderators of certain subjects and available to answer questions from those with less experience.

Key takeaway: A CoP should also be designed to encourage members to identify the knowledge they need to improve their work in AET, so they can seek out assistance from others and work together to create the new knowledge or recommendations. The CoP should provide the electronic tools needed to explore these new ideas and address common needs.

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