

CREATING GRASSROOTS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE TO DISCUSS TEACHING

By Mirjam S. Glessmer, Kjersti Daae, Terese Thoni, A. Mattias Lundmark, Kirsty Dunnett, and Hannah Herde

Innovation in teaching practices is largely based on collegial relationships and resulting feelings of individual competence and autonomy (Thirkell, 2026). Discussion among educators is one of the best ways to develop teaching competence regarding which teaching methods to use; if and how to address topics outside of the core curriculum of a subject, for example, sustainability; what resources to use for inspiration or information; which good practices to adopt or role models to consider; how to relate to students and share responsibility for learning; and how to navigate institutional or disciplinary culture. Despite their importance, such conversations often happen “backstage,” informally at the coffee machine or in an office behind closed doors, and with trusted colleagues (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009). This makes it challenging for new instructors to find colleagues with whom they can discuss and receive support for their teaching, and many young instructors can feel isolated, especially after moving to a new institution (Wennerberg and McGrath, 2022). Contextual knowledge of local teaching practices, local regulations and how to interpret them, others’ experiences teaching disciplinary concepts, among other things, might thus be inaccessible.

Events such as teaching-focused conferences and workshops, which provide opportunities to meet other instructors, often across departmental or institutional boundaries, can be one way to address this issue. However, conversations are often restricted to the event (Dunnett et al., 2026), and many events have a “returner problem,” where ideas, intentions, and contacts may not be followed up in, or from, the “home” context (Bolander Laksov, 2024). One way to combat the returner problem might be to organize opportunities locally, for example, in a single department or faculty, and bring some of the backstage conversations out in the open. Local forums organized to discuss teaching and learning can provide easier and more frequent opportunities to continue conversations. They can contribute to local teaching culture and provide conditions for development of thematic communities (Bolander Laksov et al., 2008).

To address a lack of opportunities to discuss our own teaching, we (the authors) have successfully initiated four regular, local informal or semi-formal initiatives to discuss teaching and learning at three Scandinavian universities (see details for inspiration in

Table 1). The initiatives are varied in scope, focus, and scale. While the factors contributing to their success are diverse, all were initiated bottom-up (although sometimes with support from formal leadership and/or seed funding), and we see this grassroots development as foundational to their success. The formats were determined by our own preferences and constraints as we sought to create the opportunities and discussions we wished to participate in ourselves. Some of us wanted ongoing discussions about a topic with people from across the university, so we organized regular lunch meetings to which all teachers at the university are invited (although not necessarily reached, because teachers do not have common communication channels university-wide). The absence of, and desire for, a supportive community of educators at similar career stages, or working with the same study programs, led others to build places where such a community might form. Another approach took published work as a starting point, establishing a journal club and inviting the entire department. In all examples, we intentionally chose a generous scholarship approach (Martinovic et al., 2022) that emphasizes collegiality, reciprocity, and supporting others both intellectually and emotionally over intellectual isolation or transactional relationships. We participated consistently and were invested in the communities we were developing through these regular meeting opportunities.

As well as immediate opportunities for conversations, all initiatives aimed to create local Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998), where people meet regularly to learn more about a shared concern or passion. The design of the initiatives was informed by the seven principles suggested by Wenger et al. (2002).

1. Despite their informal nature, all initiatives involve regularly planned and organized meetings that have a consistent basic form and are advertised through predictable channels.
2. The communities are co-created and allowed to evolve naturally in reaction to the developing interests, goals, and constraints of their members.
3. Meetings provide opportunities to start and continue dialogue based on both inside and outside perspectives (e.g., knowledge of community interests, issues, and challenges on the one hand, and introduction of new ideas and possibilities on the other).

TABLE 1. Overview of four example initiatives, their goals, their concrete interpretation of the Wenger et al. (2002) principles, and other success factors and challenges.

	TEACHERS' BREAKFAST (Dunnett et al., 2026)	TRANSFORMATION THURSDAY LUNCHES (Glessmer et al., 2025)	JOURNAL CLUB (Dunnett et al., 2026)	NETWORK FOR JUNIOR TEACHERS (Bierlich et al., 2025)
LOCATION OF THE INITIATIVE	Geophysical Institute at the University of Bergen, Norway	Lund University, Sweden	Department of Geosciences, University of Oslo, Norway	Department of Physics at Lund University, Sweden
GOAL OF THE INITIATIVE	Build a community of practice of teachers from all study programs at a small institution. Based on the shared context, facilitate knowledge transfer, create synergies, and inspire teachers to develop new and more active learning strategies.	Connect teachers interested in talking about teaching for sustainability across a large and broad university to help them feel less alone, find emotional support, learn from and inspire each other, and find cooperation partners.	Provide a space for teachers to discuss topics related to teaching and learning, with literature providing a neutral starting point for discussion.	Establish a forum for tenure track and non-tenure track junior teachers in physics to discuss teaching methods and crafting of pedagogical philosophies honestly and constructively, with confidentiality as core principle, and shared context allowing for targeted discussions.
PRINCIPLES (Wenger et al., 2002)				
1. REGULAR RHYTHM	Monthly to every other month	Every other week	Monthly during term time	Three times per term
2. CO-CREATED AND EVOLVING NATURALLY IN RESPONSE TO DEVELOPING INTERESTS, GOALS, AND CONSTRAINTS OF MEMBERS	- Participants can suggest topics or share results from their own work. - Changed from one topic per session to short presentations and plenty of time for free discussions on topics that are relevant at the moment.	- Participants can suggest topics or share their own experiences. - Changed from Thursdays to alternating Tuesday/ Thursday to make it easier to attend. - Increased frequency from monthly to every other week. - Started to sometimes set topics to make format more predictable and meetings with agenda easier to prioritize than informal lunch, thus lowering threshold to participation.	- Participants can pick up local concerns, including through presentations by students. - Reduced reading time by sharing summaries of (longer) articles and presenting articles in meeting. - Invited interested students (e.g., teaching assistants or engaged in student organizations) when topics may be of interest to them.	- Participants bring scenarios/practical classroom challenges, literature, or questions for roundtable discussion, or asynchronous discussion and reflection. - Refined the operating principles established collectively in an initial meeting.
3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE WITH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVES	Inviting guests for networking and inspiration.	- Inviting guests for networking or input on topics. - Rotating meeting venue across the main and two satellite campuses.	Reading literature and/or summary blogposts.	Including a senior faculty member as a facilitator to offer experience and perspective on specific context and connect with resources, including literature.
4. DIFFERENT LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT WELCOME	- Join and see what happens. - Suggest own topics. - Present results from projects in the university pedagogical training program.	- Join and see what happens. - Attend regularly. - Suggest/host topics. - Organize meetings.	- Show up and discuss. - Present article. - Listen in. - Read without attending. - Discuss with non-attendees. - Use awareness of literature to search for literature on other topics. - Propose topics or articles.	- Join and see what happens. - Attend regularly. - Present own topics. - Organize meetings.
5. BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COMMUNITY SPACES	- In a department meeting room. - Preparation and follow-ups one-on-one.	- In university lunch places. - Often leads to one-on-one or small group follow-ups.	- In a department meeting room. - Some articles summarized in blog posts. - Articles also discussed individually, especially by organizers.	- In a department meeting room. - Meetings with whole group and in subgroups.

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TABLE 1. Continued...

	TEACHERS' BREAKFAST (Dunnett et al., 2026)	TRANSFORMATION THURSDAY LUNCHES (Glessmer et al., 2025)	JOURNAL CLUB (Dunnett et al., 2026)	NETWORK FOR JUNIOR TEACHERS (Bierlich et al., 2025)
PRINCIPLES (Wenger et al. 2002) — continued				
6. VALUE CREATION BY COMMUNITY	Dedicated space and protected time to discuss teaching practice and engage with each other's ideas.			
	• Connecting with other teachers. • Sharing experiences and resources. • Discussing and interpreting institutional rules and regulation of teaching and learning.	• Connecting with other educators. • Giving and finding emotional support. • Sharing of resources. • Sharing of knowledge and experiences.	• Understanding new perspectives through literature on specific teaching problems and departmental politics. • Discussing and analyzing issues that interest the community through new language and frameworks.	• Working through challenges together in real time without judgment, benefiting from variety of perspectives. • Sense of collective responsibility for teaching quality, ability to work together to promote institutional policy advancement.
7. COMBINED FAMILIARITY AND EXCITEMENT	Alternate between meetings with a fixed agenda related to teaching at the department / faculty and open meetings.	Alternate between invited guests on topics and meetings that are open for whatever topic comes up.	Combine the format of a journal club, familiar from a research context, with a new topic and extend invitation to entire department.	Modeled on group meetings and early career mentor groups. Clear expectations (possible meeting hours, bringing snacks).
OTHER SUCCESS FACTORS AND CHALLENGES				
SUCCESS FACTORS	• A coordinator to set a schedule (avoid conflicts with teaching), book meeting room, send out invitations, arrange coffee and snacks. • Department leadership attends regularly and encourages teachers to participate, thus raising perceived importance of meetings.	• Integrated in the larger initiative Teaching for Sustainability (Glessmer, et al., 2025) and advertised through their channels (online team collaboration platform, newsletter, blog).	• Open to all staff, irrespective of permanence of position or teaching activity. • Range of topics and openness of discussion. • Choice of short papers.	• Rotating the person responsible for administrative load to distribute workload fairly. • Active asynchronous communication channel to propose new discussion topics and keep in touch.
	Rotating or shared responsibility for organization, snacks, etc., enhance the perceived importance of the time together, because someone was willing to go out of their way to make the meeting happen and special for everybody.			
	Including some element of a shared meal such as coffee, snacks, or lunch together, to support community			
CHALLENGES	Regular attendees among the teachers, but hard to reach everyone.	Uses people's lunch breaks for professional development that should be part of paid work.	Difficult to identify topics of interest and to find sufficiently short and accessible research articles; attendance very variable.	Identifying time to meet that works for early career teachers with different constraints. Tension between adding newly hired early career teachers and core group's career progressions; integrating new members in curated group dynamics.

4. Different levels of participation are possible: everybody who attends a meeting is respected and welcome, and their contributions to the conversations are considered valid, regardless of prior attendance or level of expertise.
5. The communities exist both in public spaces, with open, well-advertised meetings, and in private spaces, as conversations between meetings.
6. All communities explicitly reflect on and discuss the value of the respective community for sustaining motivation and momentum, both for organizers and participants.
7. While the format of the meetings is often characteristic of an academic environment, the topic and the speakers can be unusual, and extra, quasi-spontaneous events can also occur.

In [Table 1](#), we illustrate the practical implementation of the seven principles with our four cases and note some other factors that stand out to us as helping or hindering success.

We started our communities of practice bottom-up with us as the main drivers, but the seven principles can also be used to design a community of practice “from the outside.” Based on our experience with the success of our four communities of practice and seeing many unsuccessful efforts to create similar communities top down, our recommendation to leaders who would like such a community for their teachers is to model the behavior they want. Show up: if leaders and organizers cannot be bothered, why should anyone else? Be friendly and inviting; engage with the topics to show that you care and that these discussions matter. And if you do hand over organizing responsibilities, continue attending. If you delegate organizing events, or if someone proposes establishing such a venture as a grassroots initiative, turn up occasionally (i.e., once a term) and show interest and support. Support may look like financing the snacks or installing a fancy coffee machine as a meeting point (Bolander Laksov et al., 2008); offering to “reply all” to the invite and emphasizing that this is a good opportunity for everyone in the department (and then doing so unprompted); highlighting the venture in, for example, departmental meetings; providing administrative support; or making sure that the opportunity is known to be endorsed by department leadership.

Communities of practice are not infinitely self-sustaining. They require continual committed leadership and engaged participation to stay meaningful; otherwise, they will drastically transform or even die (Wenger et al., 2002). However, community forming groups and meeting opportunities such as any of those we describe can be valuable to participants regardless of whether they last one year or 30. For all of us, these initiatives have been fulfilling work, made meaningful through the communities we sought and found.

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