

# Teaching and Learning Communities of Practice (CoPs) in Economics

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## ABSTRACT

Among existing infrastructures to disseminate innovative teaching methods and to build collaborative networks, we situate a community of practice (CoP). We explain what a CoP is and compare it with teaching-focused economics journals and conferences, and other infrastructures such as institutional teaching centres. Since 2016 the Economics Department at the University of Toronto has used a variety of CoPs, which serves as an instructive case study. We document substantial positive impacts. To facilitate adoption elsewhere, we discuss guiding principles, give practical advice, and confront challenges.

**KEYWORDS:** community of practice, higher education, teaching support, mentoring, reading group

**JEL CODES:** A2, A20, A29

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Insufficient teaching-focused infrastructure can limit professional development, impair network building, and promote a culture that undervalues excellent teaching. Training in teaching is limited in economics PhD programs (Allgood, Hoyt, and McGoldrick 2018). Over an academic career, opportunities to build local and broad teaching-focused networks are meagre if economics departments do not host teaching-focused events and if teaching-focused conferences<sup>2</sup> are not widely attended. Yet, networks provide moral support, facilitate sharing of teaching practices, connect professors to relevant pedagogical literature, speed adoption of new technologies, and lower innovation costs, which are critical to advancing teaching.<sup>3</sup>

A community of practice (CoP) can address these challenges. We describe a CoP as a group of academic economists – who create a “community” (the “C”) – that confronts challenges and opportunities in the “practice” (the “P”) of teaching economics. CoPs are novel and emerging in economics.<sup>4</sup> This paper presents insights from an instructive case study of CoP implementations in the Economics Department at the University of Toronto (U of T) over the past eight years.

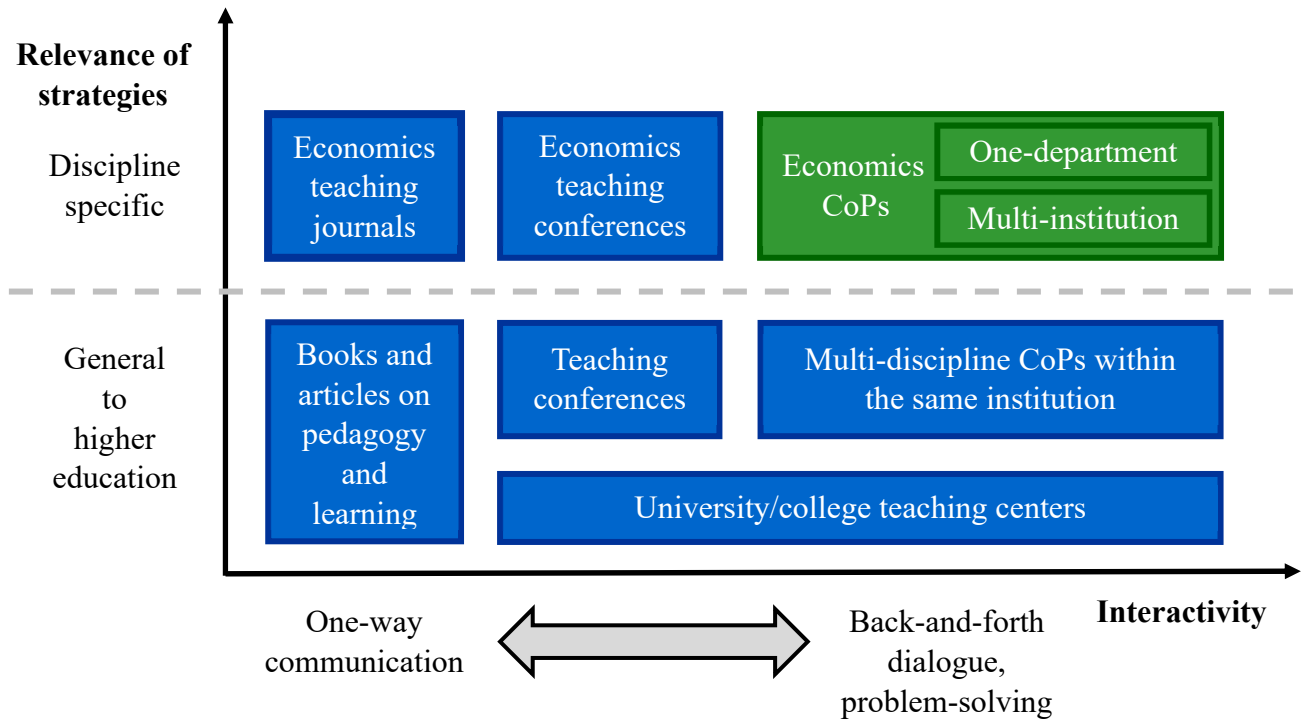
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<sup>2</sup> Examples include the Conference on Teaching and Research in Economic Education (CTREE) in the US hosted by the AEA, the Developments in Economics Conference (DEE) in the UK by The Economics Network, and the online TeachECONference by the Centre for Teaching and Learning in Economics (CTaLE). The AEA lists economics education conferences at <https://www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/economic-education/conferences>.

<sup>3</sup> An established teaching-focused network exists in the UK: *The Economics Network* <https://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/>.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Parama Chaudhury, Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning Economics (CTaLE) in the UK announced a new initiative to create a Community of Practice in an August 22, 2023 e-mail to the CTaLE mailing list.

Figure 1 situates a CoP among familiar avenues for teaching support. The vertical axis is specificity to economics and the horizontal axis measures interactivity, engagement, and sociality<sup>5</sup>, which are building blocks for collaborative network formation.



**Figure 1:** Categorizing teaching support and professional development opportunities

Pedagogical books are at the bottom left for two reasons. First, some strategies may be discordant in an economics context. Second, readers cannot query authors about implementation obstacles and authors cannot directly engage with readers to motivate them to finish the book and actively reflect on it. While institutional teaching centers may offer interactive small-cohort courses, they serve diverse constituents – ranging from a nursing program instructor to a Slavic languages

<sup>5</sup> Eyler (2018) explains how sociality via classroom interactions is an important motivator for student effort, beyond grades, as part of an argument for active class time. Professors, like students, are also motivated by sociality.

instructor – that can limit relevance for economists. In contrast, teaching-focused economics journals are discipline-specific, but are passive resources. Teaching-focused economics conferences foster more interactivity, but financial and time costs raise barriers to participation. CoPs stand apart: they are interactive with low barriers to participation and give the infrastructure for regular back-and-forth dialogue and problem solving for teaching economics.<sup>6</sup>

Table 1 lists some strengths of the four economics-focused teaching supports. This paper focuses on one-department CoPs in the third column, where strengths stem from members teaching economics in the same department.<sup>7</sup> A departmental focus allows progress on goals of enhanced local networks and teaching culture, greater curricular coherence, and better recognition of colleagues for excellent teaching. Also, local infrastructure removes obstacles to participation and to teaching-focused professional development.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First it explores the related literature. Then it shares the U of T case study and three distinct, and sometimes concurrent, CoP formats: a seminar-style series, a mentoring group, and a reading group. Next it offers substantive evidence of positive impact. After that the paper generalizes the steps in organizing a CoP and gives some advice. The final section explains how this paper can help others organize a CoP and recaps the case for it.

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<sup>6</sup> *Multi-discipline* CoPs are mostly beyond the scope of this paper. For example, at the University of Toronto, Arts & Science – with departments like history and chemistry, but also entities like the Cinema Studies Institute – started a CoP in 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Note that this does *not* preclude inviting outside experts to lead some sessions.

**Table 1.** Strengths of four economics-specific teaching and learning support infrastructures

Teaching-focused economics journals	Teaching-focused economics conferences	Economics CoP <sup>a</sup>	
		One-department	Multi-institution <sup>b</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Editorial and peer review enhance rigor and evidentiary support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vetting via submission process and discussants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low barriers to participation for broad spectrum of colleagues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity if lack a critical mass of local colleagues</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breadth and depth: pedagogy, practice, and specific courses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exposure to ideas and perspectives from many institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific to student population, institutional policies, and resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideas and perspectives from other contexts</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fully accessible online asynchronously and searchable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking opportunities with other economists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May enhance local departmental teaching culture and networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potentially build a broad network</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition for passionate educators: publications on CV</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presenting gives opportunity for recognition on CV</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitates rapid local diffusion of teaching practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide view of developments in economics instruction</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicates important trends in economics education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generates enthusiasm for the scholarship of teaching and learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breaks course silos to aid the coherence across courses and programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential for granular foci (e.g. experiments, principles courses)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can reinforce new methods or curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move working papers closer to publication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nimble: can respond to rapid change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expedite widespread diffusion of innovations</li> </ul>

<sup>a</sup> Some of the strengths of economics CoPs would also apply to multi-discipline CoPs.

<sup>b</sup> We do not explore multi-institution CoPs in any depth, given a lack of direct experience, not a lack of promise.

## Literature review

The value of community is recognized in economics education. For example, McGoldrick (2014, 172) states, “As a community of practitioners, we have so much to gain from sharing our experiences and expertise.” However, communities of practice originated outside of economics

and outside of academia (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002).<sup>8</sup> A subsequent literature applies CoPs to teaching in higher education (Viskovic 2006; McDonald and Cater-Steel 2017; and Wilson, Wilson, and Witthaus 2020). McDonald and Star (2008, 233) describe how professors “are often isolated and unaware of the practices of others” and the associated loss of institutional memory, mentoring opportunities, and chances for self-reflection.<sup>9</sup> Beatty et al. (2020, 3) offer a succinct description: “[CoPs] can capture and capitalise on the benefits of incidental corridor conversations, by providing regular opportunities for collaborative learning.” Like this paper, McDonald and Star (2008) and Beatty et al. (2020) describe case studies with membership tied to teaching in a program (in areas cognate to economics). Wenger and Snyder (2000) argue for the value of CoPs where the members are facing similar challenges: organizing the group by department or program is one way to achieve that.

To assess the value of CoPs, the literature uses various methods, such as surveys. Measuring impact is challenging, especially when some goals are to shift culture and build community. Wenger and Snyder (2000) argue for utilizing nontraditional methods, and when documenting the impacts of the economics CoPs at U of T this paper explores their advice in more detail.

We add to the literature with another detailed case study and assess impact. Further, an economics case study helps bring CoPs to the attention of more academic economists.

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<sup>8</sup> Wenger and Snyder (2000) offer an accessible and well-written case for CoPs in a corporate context.

<sup>9</sup> McDonald and Star (2008, 234) also mention sharing “war stories.” While sharing negative stories could be counter-productive if it devolved into despair, it can be an element of community building. In fact, Wenger and Snyder (2000) mention starting meetings with a routine of “going around the table and letting people vent about one thing or another.”

## CoPs in the Economics Department at U of T

The authors started a CoP in 2016<sup>10</sup> – inviting those teaching in the Economics Department at U of T – using an idea from the Psychology Department<sup>11</sup> and the Faculty of Arts & Science at U of T<sup>12</sup>. The 2016 CoP began with the overarching goals of improving the teaching in our courses and creating a more collaborative and supportive teaching culture in the Economics Department. Three more specific goals support the overarching goals: 1) inspire broad-based teaching professional development among colleagues, including those unlikely to utilize the pre-existing resources in Figure 1, 2) increase the effective adoption and implementation of innovations with context-informed details, and 3) foster communication for greater program coherence and better understanding of the needs and experiences of our student population.

Pre-CoP, the university's teaching and learning center was a primary source of new teaching strategies. Few economics instructors utilized that resource, and if they did, the ideas often seemed mismatched to large class sizes, economics assessment styles, and/or our student population. This made adopting ideas high effort and risky. Further, even among those focused on teaching, there

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<sup>10</sup> The Department of Economics, University of Toronto, *Teaching and Learning Community of Practice (CoP)* has a website at <https://freitas.faculty.economics.utoronto.ca/econ-cop/>.

<sup>11</sup> The Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, *Teaching & Learning Community of Practice* has a website at <https://www.psych.utoronto.ca/event-series/teaching-learning-community-practice>.

<sup>12</sup> The Faculty of Arts & Science, University of Toronto, *Teaching & Learning Community of Practice* has a website at <https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/faculty-staff/teaching/teaching-learning-resources/teaching-learning-community-practice>.

was not a strong culture of engaging with the pedagogical literature and teaching-focused conferences. The CoP sought to lower the barriers to teaching professional development for all faculty members and to lower the costs and risks of teaching innovation. Further, it aided learning what our colleagues were teaching and how they were teaching. Participants could see how their courses fit into the larger curriculum and better understand students' experiences before and after their own courses. By enabling group discussion, the CoP helped make unwritten norms explicit, and it did so more efficiently than individual conversations could. However, the goals are not static and continue to evolve.

Before presenting the CoPs structures in detail, we contextualize the case study. U of T is a public research university. With nearly 100,000 students, it is by far the largest North American university. In 2023/24, the Economics Department has 75 regular faculty members with 17.3 percent in the teaching stream,<sup>13</sup> and 118 PhD and 131 MA students. Undergraduates require more accounting, but number well into the thousands by any measure. Most are international students. Numbers have been rising for decades, including in economics, and economics enrolments continue growing on the largest U of T campus. The pandemic pushed all teaching online for over 20 months: 2022/23 was the first since 2018/19 without mandated online teaching.

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<sup>13</sup> 62 have typical professorial titles and 13 have titles of Professor, Associate Professor, or Assistant Professor with “, Teaching Stream” added to the end. See Arico et al. (2024) and Murdock and Cohen (2024) for more on teaching-track economists.



*First CoP structure: a seminar-series style*

The first – and primary – CoP has regular, one-hour meetings and is open to those teaching in the Economics Department. The session leader does not present a paper, but rather gives remarks on a topic related to their teaching, often using handouts and/or slides. A title and short abstract are circulated ahead of time. Table 2 shows a sample session. There is time to discuss what worked, what did not, and why, which can help attendees and the leader. To lower barriers to participation, it is held in the conference room in less busy months and the department provides lunch.

**Table 2.** Illustrative example of a CoP title and abstract from 2016-2019

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Leader:	[Faculty member in the Economics Department]
Title:	Data Literacy in the Classroom
Abstract:	The University has taken several initiatives to improve the writing skills of our students. While these short assignments are useful for multiple purposes, they do not fully address a related shortcoming for many economics students – data literacy. In the presentation, I will discuss feedback I have received from the Bank of Canada about their experiences in interviewing Economics students from UofT and other universities and discuss how we might be able to overcome some of the identified issues. In addition, I will discuss some of the data literacy exercises that I have utilized in ECO208Y, Macroeconomic Theory.

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From 2016 through 2019, each CoP series had about 8 sessions. All were seminar-style and primarily led by departmental colleagues, while external leaders helped with topics beyond departmental expertise.<sup>14</sup> In 2017 we tracked attendance: on average 18.3 colleagues attended per

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<sup>14</sup> For example, in 2017 a professor from another discipline at U of T led a session on community-engaged learning.

session and there were 47 unique attendees who on average attended 3.2 sessions. In 2018, a US teaching-track economist active in pedagogical research visited for another purpose, and was the first external economist to lead a CoP session. Attendance exceeded the usual levels. Also, teaching-stream colleagues valued connecting with an external economist with a research agenda on teaching and learning. In 2019, we invited two external economists, and these sessions also attracted higher than usual attendance.

The pandemic forced the CoP online in 2020 and 2021. The goals narrowed to transitioning teaching online and thoughtfully back to in-person. An online format stifled discussion, mirroring many colleagues' online teaching experiences.

In 2022 and 2023 the CoP returned in person. Instead of led sessions, we experimented with two new formats: 1) round-table discussion with a facilitator who may proactively gather questions (anonymously and not); 2) panel of colleagues who share their experiences for a chosen theme. Attendance dropped and skewed towards the teaching stream. The exception was a special session led by the provost's office on generative AI, including ChatGPT. In 2024 the CoP continues in person but with a return to led sessions.

Of the 75 regular departmental faculty members in 2023/24, 30 (40%) have led or co-led a session in the CoP series over these eight years. This is a particularly large fraction because some session leaders have since moved or retired (and hence are excluded from the numerator) and 75 includes new hires (who are included in the denominator). Further, chairs and associate chairs, who do annual performance reviews, continue to attend, which gives them opportunities to better understand the effort and hallmarks of excellent teaching.

### ***Second CoP structure: a mentoring group***

We formed a small CoP that lasted just over a year to provide mentoring for three new teaching-stream colleagues who joined in 2020/21 – peak pandemic disruption. The goals focused on onboarding and creating community, despite working remotely. We met regularly online and sustained engaging discussion and multi-way mentoring.

### ***Third CoP structure: a reading group***

In 2021 we launched a reading group CoP with distinct goals from the main CoP series. The initial goals were to 1) rebuild the teaching-stream community and recover from the isolation and exhaustion of emergency remote teaching; 2) figure out why previously successful teaching strategies had stopped working and which new strategies (e.g. pre-recorded videos) to continue using; and 3) to engage deeply with the pedagogical literature. The CoP reading group continues, but the first goal evolved towards maintaining community and bringing in new hires. Membership extends to teaching-stream economists at U of T and invited visitors. Weekly brown-bag meetings in late spring last about two hours with about six people attending on average. A reading group can be organized around books, articles, or a combination, and the first three reading group CoPs adopted a book focus.<sup>15</sup> Participants read assigned chapters ahead of time, completing one or two

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<sup>15</sup> For the 2021, 2022, 2023 reading group CoPs, the five books are: 1) *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*, 2) *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories behind Effective College Teaching*, 3) *Embedded: Formative Assessment*, 4) *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*, and 5) *Inclusive Teaching: Strategies for Promoting Equity in the College Classroom*. The reference section gives complete citations.

books over about eight weeks. Three reading prompts adapted from Spencer (2020) organize discussion:

- **Connect:** One thing you already do that captures the ideas in each chapter
- **Update:** One way you can incorporate the ideas in each chapter going forward
- **Dissonant:** Something that is confusing or discordant with your teaching context and experience

The above reading prompts invariably led to a lively and productive discussion. Members take notes on the readings, potential implementation ideas, and inspirations from meeting discussions.

### **Assessing impact**

Measuring CoP impact is hard. Obvious outcomes of interest – greater teaching effectiveness, enhanced networks, and strengthened culture – are not readily quantifiable. For teaching effectiveness, some may point to convenient numeric measures from student evaluations of teaching (SETs). Higher education relies on SETs despite their limitations and biases (Spooren, Brockx, and Mortelmans 2013; Chávez and Mitchell 2020). Moreover, students may not like methods that increase learning, even when shown evidence (Kornell and Bjork 2008; Braga, Paccagnella, and Pellizzari 2014; Carpenter, Witherby, and Tauber 2020). Wenger and Snyder (2000) argue for nontraditional methods: “The best way ... to assess the value of a community of practice is by listening to members’ stories... The solution to the conundrum of valuing communities of practice is to gather anecdotal evidence systematically.” Over the eight years, we have not systematically gathered evidence, but there is compelling evidence and there are stories.

### *Adoption of a transformative educational technology: an online grading platform*

Our CoP led to widespread adoption of a transformative educational technology for marking in-person tests, online submissions, and in-class activities. An online grading platform<sup>16</sup> reduces marking time, improves accuracy, lowers the cost of comments, allows simultaneous team marking, is portable, increases security, allows continuous monitoring of marking, and enables returning in-person, paper-based tests with one click. An early adopter led a well attended 2017 CoP session that sped its diffusion, and most courses now use it. Further, the efficiency gains allowed some large courses to replace multiple-choice with open-ended questions on tests.

### *Curriculum change*

Those teaching economics courses at U of T have substantial autonomy over the curriculum, more than at some other institutions, which makes a CoP important for curriculum change. For example, a recurring theme from our CoP series is the challenge for students to analyze economic data and communicate results. The inaugural session explored how students fared with a 400-level course assignment where they work with data from the professor's ongoing research projects. Another looked at students' ability to analyze macro data and present results in a course built around a national case competition.<sup>17</sup> Also, an external economist with expertise in teaching econometrics led a session that advanced our reflection on training at the program level. While many factors contributed to the 2020 creation of the Focus in Data Analytics programs in economics, the

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<sup>16</sup> Some specific ones include Gradescope, Crowdmark, and Assign2. We have used Crowdmark.

<sup>17</sup> The Bank of Canada runs The Governor's Challenge: <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/research/governors-challenge/>.

ongoing CoP series helped. In 2024, the data-focus theme continued with a colleague leading a well-attended session on how to efficiently support students in debugging code and producing replicable results when writing empirical papers and how to efficiently mark them.

***Building a collaborative and productive teaching community: 2017 CoP survey***

In 2017 we surveyed all 33 economics colleagues who attended a CoP session and had a 42 percent response rate. Table 3 shows that session attendance universally provoked at least some action.

**Table 3.** 2017 CoP survey responses, Economics Department, University of Toronto

Overall, how would you rate the CoP? 1(Poor) to 5 (Excellent)	Mean: 4.71, Median: 5
Are you more likely to talk to a colleague if you have a teaching question/concern because you attended the CoP?	Yes=100%, No=0%
Will you change something in your teaching because of a CoP session?	Yes=100%, No=0%
I may tweak something I already do	42.9%
I will adopt something new	50%
I will drop something I currently do	0%
Tweak and adopt something new	7.1%

An open-ended question asked: “If you are making a change, could you briefly tell us about it?” Some illustrative replies are: “*I will attempt to build more data literacy into my course and focus on more big picture principles*” and “*Using Crowdmark to benchmark TAs.*” Another asked: “What did you like best about the CoP?” Some replies are: “*Collegial atmosphere and honest discussion about works / doesn’t*” and “*Colleagues are doing interesting things in the classroom; this is a great forum to find out what they are.*”

### *An externally recognizable signal of valuing teaching and building community*

Having a CoP can help substantiate claims of valuing teaching and building community by serving as an observable action in a departmental strive towards excellent teaching and a strong and supportive community. On numerous occasions the existence and substance of our CoP series has captured the positive attention of reviewers internal and external to our institution.<sup>18</sup> Hence, a CoP can improve teaching and culture and allow recognition for those accomplishments.

### *Teaching innovation rooted in the pedagogy literature*

The reading group CoP has enabled substantial innovations in our core courses. Two examples are structural changes to: 1) use class time more productively and 2) design for more inclusive teaching.

The inaugural Summer 2021 reading group CoP members faced two questions: “What are the best uses of in-person class time?” and “What should we do with the pandemic stock of pre-recorded lectures?” Eyster (2018) encouraged deep discussions of how curiosity, sociality, emotion, authenticity, and failure affect learning. The upshot was a group decision to adopt a flipped (inverted) classroom design<sup>19</sup> – rebranding in-person lectures as workshops where students prepare with pre-recorded videos. Discussion of the principles, strategies, and practical examples in Eyster

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<sup>18</sup> For example, a 2021 report by external reviewers said they are “very impressed” by our CoP, described its structure and history, and praised “initiatives undertaken to enhance a sense of community in the program/unit.”

<sup>19</sup> In the 2019 CoP series, an invited economist from another large public university described an effective implementation of flipped classrooms in a large core undergraduate course in economics.

(2018) drove implementation choices. For the Summer 2022 reading group CoP, Wiliam (2018) offered timely guidance in refining workshop strategies and the associated use of formative assessments. These innovations impact most of our first- and second-year undergraduate courses taken by thousands of students each year, and some upper-year courses.

For the second example, the reading group CoP sparked adjustments for more inclusive teaching. Hogan and Sathy (2022) advocates for more structure and more required work to make teaching more inclusive, which surprised the 2023 reading group given institutional messaging that encourages flexibility to build inclusivity. While members had already adopted some strategies to increase required work and provide more structure, this book affected how to frame this and has encouraged a continued shift towards more structure. One example is more courses now using graded participation during workshops, which makes student preparation and attendance required.

Overall, the books and group discussion in the reading group CoP have sparked innovations that are well-grounded in the pedagogical literature.<sup>20</sup> Further, multiple members report treasuring this professional development activity because of the chance to engage with books on pedagogy and to do so as a group.

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<sup>20</sup> Another example is our now expanding adoption of a “no hands up” rule during workshops. This came out of the Summer 2022 reading group CoP with Wiliam (2018).



### *A strengthened mutual support network*

We end with the most intangible impact of our CoP. Our teaching community has become stronger and more supportive.<sup>21</sup> Beyond improving teaching and scholarship, community can sustain academic economists as people. A respondent to the 2017 CoP survey captures the value of a mutual support network with: “*The ‘community’ part is actually the best part.*” After extraordinary pandemic teaching efforts, professors are coping with students and administrators expecting more and an accelerating rate of change of technology and students’ needs, which makes community and support for the people teaching necessary.

### **CoP design choices: steps, considerations, and challenges**

To smooth the path for potential adopters, it is useful to abstract from the specific CoPs described earlier. Organizing a CoPs has four steps: 1) identify willing organizer(s), 2) form goals and delineate membership, 3) choose meeting formats, and 4) work out meeting details. This section discusses key design considerations and explores challenges.

For organizer(s), effort costs are high at the start when the idea may be foreign to potential members and there are many structural decisions to make. We have found having two organizers helps. Next, goals and membership depend on the context. For example, should department leaders be included? Consider if this may dampen interest from other potential participants or instead be an educational opportunity because they bring expertise and/or because they could learn more

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<sup>21</sup> Notably, more than one recent hire in an Assistant Professor, Teaching Stream position has commented that our supportive and collaborative culture around teaching is part of what led them choose us over competing offers.

about teaching and innovations beyond what SETs can capture. Similarly, whether to invite graduate students is another consideration, and that decision can vary with goals across departments and within a department over time. Another challenge may be negative group dynamics among constituencies within a department or the isolation of one or more colleagues, possibly related to their academic profile or personal attributes such as gender or race. While we argue for a CoP within one economics department, some may have too few potential (or willing) participants or a toxic culture. Options may include joining an established cross-disciplinary CoP within the institution or organizing a CoP with invited economists from other institutions.

The choice of meeting format can help address challenges in setting goals and delineating CoP members. The following bullet list recaps the non-exhaustive possibilities for meeting formats and considers the pros and cons of each from various perspectives.

- **Seminar-style:** This requires identifying willing and able leaders for a productive session of interest to the community. Organizers may advise hesitant colleagues that they do *not* need a paper, and that one handout or a few slides may be enough. Organizers can also explore inviting guest speakers from their institution and/or, with funding, external speakers. A seminar-style is a familiar format for potential participants, which can help maximize appeal and attendance.
- **Round-table discussion:** This is a model of diffuse expertise that can facilitate communication among colleagues with varying levels of experience. Organizers identify a theme of interest and have a strategy to keep discussion moving. No presenter means that everyone is expected to contribute, so this format may discourage some potential

participants, including those less invested in teaching. An advantage of this approach is that it is low cost to set up.

- **Reading group:** This is like a round-table discussion except that the author(s) of the readings shoulder much of the work. Organizers delineate membership, set goals, select the book(s) or other readings, and arrange the meeting details. This helps address situations where there are insufficient potential session leaders and/or there is a need for external expertise. It also works well with small groups, so long as there are at least three participants. A unique advantage of this approach may be its potency in creating a deep and meaningful sense of community and support. However, the organizer(s) need a way to identify high-quality readings that would interest potential participants. (Note 14 has a list of five great books.) Also, participants must spend substantial time preparing – reading and reflecting on any reading prompts – and hence this format may work only for those with a greater teaching focus.
- **Other smaller-group structures:** Aside from a reading group, there are other creative structures that can work for smaller groups. It could be as simple as finding a regular time (e.g. first Thursday of the month), for some colleagues to meet over coffee to discuss teaching. Also, CoPs can be shorter lived and targeted. For example, a CoP mentoring group of multiple new hires.

For the final step, organizers choose meeting frequency, dates, time of day, duration, location, advertising strategies, and (possibly) refreshments. CoPs will likely require repeated reinvention as the community and the challenges evolve, goals shift, and experience shows how various structures work (or do not).

## Concluding remarks

This paper seeks to motivate and guide potential CoP organizers who are striving to expand existing infrastructures to build collaborative and supportive teaching networks and disseminate innovative teaching methods. It provides a useful reference for potential CoP organizers and participants and can be used to bolster requests for departmental support for a CoP initiative.

The U of T case study demonstrates the unique benefits and impacts of CoPs. For example, CoPs give the infrastructure to: build a supportive network and make teaching economics a less lonely endeavor; share with others without the barriers of giving conference presentations and publishing journal articles; quickly collaborate on pressing issues like pandemic-driven learning losses and assessment design given generative AI; and improve teaching culture. CoPs can achieve these outcomes, but only if they exist.

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## Appendix

**Table A.1.** Number of CoP sessions, by course level and by year

Course level	2019	2018	2017	2016
First-year undergraduate	1.5	1	2	0
Second-year undergraduate	1	1	2	4
Third-year undergraduate	3.5	2	1	0
Fourth-year undergraduate	1	1	1	2
General (not tied to a course)	2	3	2	2

**Table A.2.** Number of CoP session leaders, by title and by year

Title of Session Leader, Co-Leader	2019	2018	2017	2016
Professor	0	2	4	1
Associate Professor	0	0	1	0
Assistant Professor	1	2	2	1
Associate Professor, Teaching Stream	4	2	1	4
Assistant Professor, Teaching Stream	1	1	1	1
External Speaker	3	2	2	2



Below are the comprehensive replies for two open-ended questions<sup>22</sup> from the 2017 survey of University of Toronto, Economics Department faculty members who had attended a session. For the question “If you are making a change, could you briefly tell us about it?” all replies are next.

- *I am considering using Crowdmark for my grading, but I worry that my sections [class sizes] may be too small for this to make sense at this point.*
- *Writing assignments, in-class discussions, and group work*
- *Complete redesign of [a named course component] in ECOXXX inspired by [Name]’s session (instead of experiments, my students will interactively analyze real economic data) and [Name]’s session (which greatly helped me choose the right level for 200-level undergraduates). Also, inspired by a broad range of session in 2016 and 2017 on the challenges of effective tutorial time.*
- *Hard to say right now; I will keep [Name]’s talk in mind – can my students manipulate data in real time – so I may add an in-class assignment to this effect. Also to help w. notion that they may not be doing the data work themselves (in assignments) so I want to add a way to confirm & give incentive to students to do their own work. I will also keep my ears open for podcasts.*
- *use of Crowdmark; monitoring tutorials*
- *I will attempt to build more data literacy into my course and focus on more big picture principles.*

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<sup>22</sup> In response to a third question asking about potential *improvements*, two gave food suggestions and one requested more discussion time.

- *The emphasis on learning objectives is always eye-opening. Crowdmark also seems worth using even more.*
- *Using Crowdmark to benchmark TAs.*
- *I'm considering using Crowdmark next term*
- *considering cell phone policy; improved student feedback in Crowdmark.*

For the question “What did you like best about the CoP?” all replies are next.

- *Gets me thinking about teaching at a time when I can still feasibly tweak things for my upcoming fall courses*
- *The enthusiastic speakers and engaged audience*
- *What I like best is easy to identify: The opportunity to substantively engage with my colleagues about teaching. (There are lots of other things too.)*
- *Love the CoP workshops! - engaging with other faculty; finding out what they do & how they do it; loved the lunch too :)*
- *Learning more about teaching innovation and efforts across the department*
- *The “community” part is actually the best part.*
- *Learn from various experience and teaching approach*
- *Collegial atmosphere and honest discussion about works / doesn't.*
- *I was able to attend only the first two sessions and the last one. The session on Crowdmark was very helpful for me.*
- *Colleagues are doing interesting things in the classroom; this is a great forum to find out what they are.*