Communities of Practice: A Manual for Facilitators of the BRIDGE Way

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BRIDGE
LINKING INNOVATORS IN EDUCATION

Contents

Purpose of this Manual

BRIDGE is concerned with creating a group of facilitators who can represent the methodology and approach of BRIDGE in facilitated workshops, wherever they will occur and in whatever environment, across the country. BRIDGE believes in sharing, collaborating and reducing duplication of education activities where it can and to that end have created two streams of activity, namely, the facilitation of Communities of Practice (CoPs) and the development and use of knowledge products in the education arena.

Facilitators of CoPs are not trainers who tend to teach and preach what has to happen in a workshop but are people who allow a group to create their own thoughts and ideas under a broad platform of purpose and can steer the debate to a logical conclusion. Often referred to as Process Facilitators, a BRIDGE facilitator has to have a set of unique skills and a broad level of competency.

> However, most of all the facilitator has to have a knowledge base around the subject area being discussed so as to be able to analysis and synthesise what is being said.

This manual will set out the role of a BRIDGE Process Facilitator and will give some of the background that underpins the way BRIDGE operates.

BRIDGE works primarily in the area of education and so all facilitators have to have experience of this world, have to understand the educational transformational strategy being followed in the country and a willingness to keep abreast of broader development issues.

Some of the areas of education in which BRIDGE presently works include:

- Early Childhood Development (ECD)
- TVET Colleges
- Primary and secondary schools
- Leadership in and Management of schools
- School Governance
- Principals' competence
- Teacher development
- Maths and Science research and application
- Parental support of learners
- Post school access
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- IT in education
- Twinning schools
- Development of school coaches
- Research on levers of educational change and transformation
- Mentorship

Sharing Experiences of facilitation and training

Activity One – self evaluation

Imaging you are about to facilitate a workshop on an education topic with which you are familiar.

Complete the following table as fully as possible:

What I bring to the facilitated process	What I need to run a successful facilitated process
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.
8.	8.
9.	9.
10.	10.

Were you surprised by what you wrote?

Did you think deeply about the process and your answers?

Is this the first time you have questioned yourself in such a way?

How often do you reflect on your work? Is it enough time?

Are you a good facilitator? How do you know?

How different is facilitation to training?

For historical reasons, a lot of Human Resource and Learning & Development practitioners still refer to our space as "Training", and the people who carry out the work as "Trainers". So companies like ours are often lumped together as 'training companies'. We understand that and we're sympathetic to it. The upside is that by using the word training we are easily identified and categorised – our clients and prospects know exactly what we do.

So we wanted to take this opportunity to point out the difference between what we do (which we call facilitation) and training. To start with, let's look at a definition of the verb "to facilitate". The origins can be traced back to the 17th Century in France. Faciliter means 'to render easy', the word derived from the Latin facilis meaning 'easy'. So we can determine from this that to facilitate is to render, or make, easy.

The different roles of the facilitator and trainer are very important in determining the dynamics of a group. For example, in a typical training session the trainer might stand at the front and disseminate information. Training is predominantly focused on the transfer of knowledge and information from trainer to learners. Of course there is discussion and sometimes even debate around topics. However, there is usually a prescriptive agenda and method of delivery and a minimum amount of material that needs to be covered in a training session. Depending on the experience level of the trainer there is a danger that participants see themselves as observers rather than active participants in the learning journey. Their takeaway may be 'stuff' learned rather than having experienced something shift.

The facilitator by contrast will tend to draw out contributions from the group, helping them to discover the information. Facilitation is more fluid and whilst there is still a body of material to be covered there is much more exploration and flexibility around the methods used in arriving at the same outcome. The journey between start and finish times may be dramatically different from group to group and from day to day. It may well be different between facilitators. Learners are invited to be active participants rather than observers. There is much more likely to be a real shift in individual thinking and behaviour as a direct result of the session.

The trainer might also manage things, such as time keeping, on behalf of the group. This tends to create passivity in the group and a dependency on the trainer for direction. Conversely, the facilitator might choose to sit with the group and negotiate time keeping with the participants. This encourages the group to take more responsibility and direction for their own learning. The facilitator will adapt their approach, and foster the dynamics, to meet the group's objectives. The learning process happens in the 'here and now' as group members more fully engage with themselves, with others and with the issues being addressed – a very

'alive' and holistic experience. By contrast the trainer requires group members to adapt to the pre-defined training programme.

The trainer often has the idea of delivering material to an audience whereas the facilitator utilises the wisdom that each person brings and the wisdom of the whole group.

The skills required to facilitate are on a whole different level to those of a trainer. A grounding in behavioural psychology; an in-depth understanding of group dynamics; the ability to question and process the responses; a resistance to tell, replaced by a preference to ask…all of these are vital requirements of a good facilitator. In reality the two terms are used interchangeably with little thought being given to their relative strengths. The next time you hear someone say that all trainers are alike, or that all training companies are the same, please think of this commentary and challenge them!
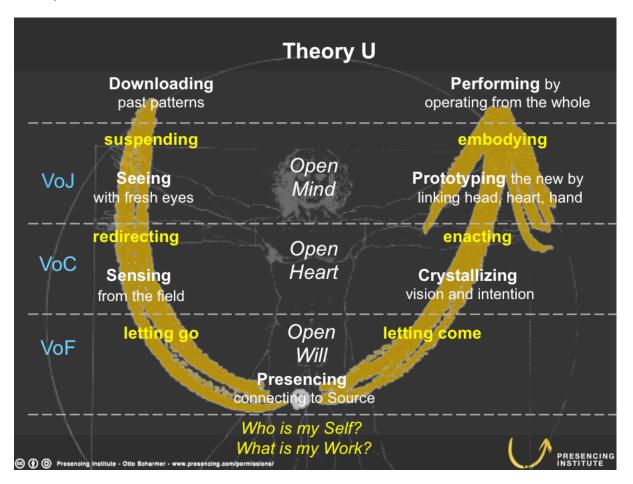
Theory U – The BRIDGE Way

The Presencing Institute in America uses and is a leader in the world of Theory U which is a theme that BRIDGE follows and believes in. The author of Theory U is Otto Scharmer and you are encouraged to read his work and actions on the Internet.

Tapping Our Collective Capacity

We live in a time of massive institutional failure, collectively creating results that nobody wants: climate change, AIDS, hunger, poverty, violence, terrorism, destruction of communities, nature, life — the foundations of our social, economic, ecological, and spiritual well-being. This time calls for a new consciousness and a new collective leadership capacity to meet challenges in a more conscious, intentional, and strategic way. The development of such a capacity would allow us to create a future of greater possibilities. Theory U is part of a response to a new way of being and existing.

Look at this diagram (from: https://www.presencing.com/principles) which summarises the Theory:

The journey through the U develops seven essential leadership capacities which can be used to change individuals and organisations. BRIDGE believes that all have the capacity to lead in a specific yet individual way and therefore uses aspects of Theory U in its work with Communities of Practice.

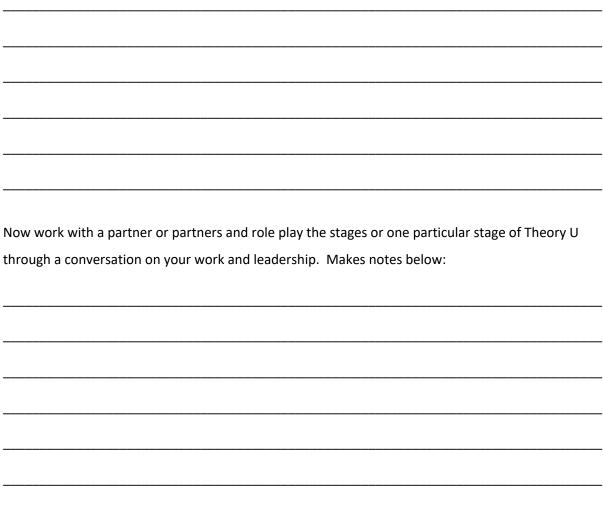The Theory U model is explained, from the website as mentioned, as follows:

1. <u>Holding the space of listening</u>: The foundational capacity of the U is listening. Listening to others, listening to oneself, and listening to what emerges from the collective. Effective listening requires the creation of open space in which others can contribute to the whole.
2. <u>Observing</u>: The capacity to suspend the "voice of judgment" is key to moving from projection to true observation.
3. <u>Sensing</u>: The preparation for the experience at the bottom of the U — presencing — requires the tuning of three instruments: the open mind, the open heart, and the open will. This opening process is not passive but an active "sensing" together as a group. While an open heart allows us to see a situation from the whole, the open will enables us to begin to act from the emerging whole.
4. <u>Presencing</u>: The capacity to connect to the deepest source of self and will allows the future to emerge from the whole rather than from a smaller part or special interest group.
5. <u>Crystalizing</u>: When a small group of key persons commits itself to the purpose and outcomes of a project, the power of their intention creates an energy field that attracts people, opportunities, and resources that make things happen. This core group functions as a vehicle for the whole to manifest.
6. <u>Prototyping</u>: Moving down the left side of the U requires the group to open up and deal with the resistance of thought, emotion, and will; moving up the right side requires the integration of thinking, feeling, and will in the context of practical applications and learning by doing.
7. <u>Performing</u>: A prominent violinist once said that he couldn't simply play his violin in Chartres cathedral; he had to "play" the entire space, what he called the "macro violin," in order to do justice to both the space and the music. Likewise, organisations need to perform at this macro level: they need to convene the right sets of players (frontline people who are connected through the same value chain) and to engage a social technology that allows a multi-stakeholder gathering to shift from debating to co-creating the new.

A BRIDGE facilitator explores Theory U in his or her work and his or her workshops and Communities of Practice. People in a Community of Practice need to go through Theory U, if there is time and opportunity. The key aspect is to focus on the future and let go of the past.

First Role Play

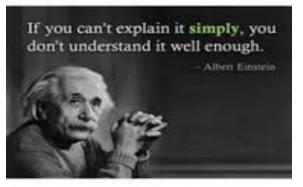Watch the role play between the facilitator and a small group. Makes notes as to what you observe and hear in the interaction, relating it to Theory U.

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Now work with a partner or partners and role play the stages or one particular stage of Theory U through a conversation on your work and leadership. Makes notes below:

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Reflective Practice

Let us start with a thought from a great scientist, Albert Einstein:

If you can't explain it **simply**, you don't understand it well enough.
— Albert Einstein

Do you think this statement is true? Explain your response to the group.

There are many definitions and explanations of reflective practice and it is the technique of reflecting that will allow you to explore Theory U in greater depth and detail. BRIDGE uses this technique in all CoPs, by asking groups to reflect and examine presentations or their own thoughts or their own actions.

But what is **Reflective Practice**?

Wikipedia defines it as:

> **Reflective practice** is the ability to reflect on an action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning.

According to one definition it involves "paying critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions, by examining practice reflectively and reflexively. This leads to developmental insight". A key rationale for reflective practice is that experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning; deliberate reflection on experience is essential.

Reflective practice can be an important tool in practice-based professional learning settings where people learn from their own professional experiences, rather than from formal learning or knowledge transfer. It may be the most important source of personal professional development and improvement. It is also an important way to bring together theory and practice; through reflection a person is able to see and label forms of thought and theory within the context of his or her work. A person who reflects throughout his or her practice is not just looking back on past actions and events, but is taking a conscious look at emotions, experiences, actions, and responses, and using that information to add to his or her existing knowledge base and reach a higher level of understanding.

There are many experts who have explored Reflective Practice, including:

Borton 1970

Kolb and Fry 1975

Argyris and Schön 1978

Gibbs 1988

Learning researcher Graham Gibbs discussed the use of structured debriefing to facilitate the reflection involved in Kolb's experiential learning cycle Gibbs presents the stages of a full structured debriefing as follows:

- (Initial experience)
- **Description**
  "What happened? Don't make judgements yet or try to draw conclusions; simply describe."
- **Feelings**
  "What were your reactions and feelings? Again don't move on to analysing these yet."
- **Evaluation**
  "What was good or bad about the experience? Make value judgements."
- **Analysis**
  "What sense can you make of the situation? Bring in ideas from outside the experience to help you."
  "What was really going on?"
  "Were different people's experiences similar or different in important ways?"
- **Conclusions (general)**
  "What can be concluded, in a general sense, from these experiences and the analyses you have undertaken?"
- **Conclusions (specific)**
  "What can be concluded about your own specific, unique, personal situation or way of working?"
- **Personal action plans**
  "What are you going to do differently in this type of situation next time?"
  "What steps are you going to take on the basis of what you have learnt?"

Johns 1995

Brookfield 1998

Stephen Brookfield proposed that critically reflective practitioners constantly research their assumptions by seeing practice through four complementary lenses: the lens of their autobiography as learners of reflective practice, the lens of other learners' eyes, the lens of colleagues' experiences, and the lens of theoretical, philosophical and research literature. Reviewing practice through these lenses makes us more aware of the power dynamics that infuse all practice settings. It also helps us detect hegemonic assumptions—assumptions that we think are in our own best interests, but actually work against us in the long run. Brookfield argued that these four lenses will reflect back to us starkly different pictures of who we are and what we do.

- *Lens 1: Our autobiography as a learner*. Our autobiography is an important source of insight into practice. As we talk to each other about critical events in our practice, we start to realise that individual crises are usually collectively experienced dilemmas. Analysing our autobiographies allows us to draw insight and meanings for practice on a deep visceral emotional level.
- *Lens 2: Our learners' eyes*. Seeing ourselves through learners' eyes, we may discover that learners are interpreting our actions in the way that we mean them. But often we are surprised by the diversity of meanings people read into our words and actions. A cardinal principle of seeing ourselves through learners' eyes is that of ensuring the anonymity of their critical opinions. We have to make learners feel safe. Seeing our practice through learners' eyes helps us teach more responsively.
- *Lens 3: Our colleagues' experiences*. Our colleagues serve as critical mirrors reflecting back to us images of our actions. Talking to colleagues about problems and gaining their perspective increases our chance of finding some information that can help our situation.
- *Lens 4: Theoretical literature*. Theory can help us "name" our practice by illuminating the general elements of what we think are idiosyncratic experiences.

So, how does one use reflective practice as a BRIDGE facilitator? Here it is important to build reflection through posing the right questions that start debate and then probing further with questions that extend the debate and allow for deeper reflection. The emphasis is on delving

deeper into participants' thoughts and allowing these thoughts to emerge in an environment where individuals feel safe to talk about their opinions and experiences.

Creating deeper reflection is easier when you have the same group of people meeting say every month as is the case with Principals' CoPs, rather than meeting on an ad hoc basis or quarterly.
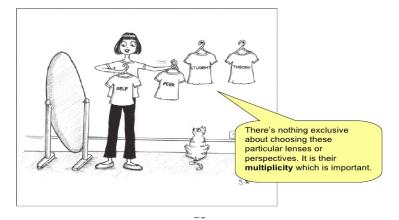
Second Role Play and Observation

Using the model of reflection of Brookfield and working in groups of three or four one person must discuss a challenge he or she has had in a work situation and how it was eventually overcome. Others in the group must act as colleagues or a new person to his debate.

Think about:

- How did the lead person discuss the situation and develop the conversation?
- How did colleagues deepen the conversation?
- How did the new person interact with others and offer further insight?
- What theoretical framework, if any, did the lead person use in the conversation?

Make notes below:

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Brookfield's four "lenses"

There's nothing exclusive about choosing these particular lenses or perspectives. It is their **multiplicity** which is important.

Case Studies

These Case Studies are useful if you are working with schools and specifically School Principals but they are also useful to show how reflective practice works and how problem solving in a collective can be developed.

Case Study A

In JJ Twala primary school, the principal, Mrs Dube was feeling under a lot of pressure. It was the beginning of term and her school was full of new learners without a spare chair, desk or space to fit anyone. Her total number of children was 884. However, the District had phoned her to say she must accept another three children of a District Official who had just moved to the area. She felt uncomfortable accepting these children. They were Xitshonga speaking children and her school offered isiZulu. Where would they sit? Who in her school could speak Xitshonga? Also, she had turned down several late applications from local parents who had missed the deadline for submission of forms. This she had done in conjunction with the SGB, so everything was above board and recorded. The District was insisting that she find room and had given her a veiled threat that the District Director would be informed if she did not comply with the request. She reflected that the rule was to accept all and turn no one away.

There was a CoP meeting that day. At the meeting, she posed the question to her CoP members:

- What should she do?

What do you believe the facilitator must do?

Case Study B

Mr Mostert, the principal of Philips Primary School in the East Rand, was wondering what to do. He had requested readers for Grades 4 to 7 in his school but they had not arrived and it was now the second week of the first term. The readers were in Afrikaans which was the medium of instruction in the school. He had phoned the District every day and was told there was a hiccup with the publishers and he would be told as soon as the books arrived at the District Office. The teachers were getting very upset as the Readers were the ones named in the CAPS documents and were essential reading. They had the old readers in the storeroom but were reluctant to use these as they were not specified texts.

There was a CoP meeting that day. At the meeting, he posed the question to his CoP members:

- What should he do?

What do you believe the facilitator do?

Mrs Govender of Victory Primary school was very worried. She had a confrontation with a parent, Mrs Xhosa, who wanted to see her urgently because she said a teacher at her school had been racist to her son. She accused the principal of being racist also, as there were a large number of Indian teachers in the school, although not the majority. Victory Primary school was placed in an affluent area and had been a former Model C school. There had been difficulties in changing over to a quintile 5 school as this put extra pressure on the SGB to find funds, especially for extra teachers to deal with predominantly black, African children, but they were succeeding. Mrs Govender had spoken to Mrs Xhosa by phone and told her she would deal with it but only after the exams which were in full swing. She was needed to invigilate classes and supervise exam paper delivery and could not meet with the parent immediately. Mrs Govender had spoken to the teacher concerned and thought the complaint was not immediately urgent. She had written this down in a letter to the parent. However, Mrs Xhosa had gone to the District, complaining about Mrs Govender and the District had called the school immediately saying Mrs Govender needed to report the following Tuesday to a Disciplinary Board as racism was not allowed in any school in the province. Mrs Govender was upset as she had informally found out what had happened and in her opinion the matter was not one of racism but of misunderstanding.

There was a CoP meeting later that day and Mrs Govender took her problems to the CoP for guidance and asked:

- What should she do?

What do you believe the facilitator must do?

The answers to all the Case Studies lie with the CoP itself and they will decide. The facilitator has to guide the discussion and even if he or she disagrees must not interfere with the decisions taken. How the discussion is guided is the critical point that each facilitator must consider.

Facilitating a BRIDGE CoP – what is the difference?

There are many definitions of Communities of Practice. Below is how BRIDGE sees what a CoP can do and how it can operate:

WHAT IS A CoP?

A CoP is a gathering of individuals who have the same focus and interests in achieving an aim. A CoP meets regularly, say once a month, and is facilitated by someone who understands what education is about and can help the participants reach a solution or suggested plan of action after a discussion or reflection. The quality of the CoP will be seen in the quality of discussion and the practicality of action suggested.

The ideal CoP will be able to generate its own action plan and pathway but generally speaking it has to be facilitated by an outside person until levels of trust have been built and the group has a sense of cohesion.

The work of Wenger and Trayner has described how Communities of Practice operate and the characteristics of such. (Refer to: http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/). They were the pioneers of research in this area.

According to them:
Communities of Practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of leaners defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope, or a group of principals involved in school improvement.

> **In a nutshell: Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.**

Note that this definition allows for, but does not assume, intentionality: learning can be the reason the community comes together or an incidental outcome of members' interactions. Not everything called a community is a Community of Practice. A neighbourhood for instance, is often called a community, but is usually not a Community of Practice. Three characteristics are crucial:

The domain: A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.

The community: In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other; they care about their standing with each other.

The practice: A Community of Practice is not merely a community of interest–people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

There are identified planes of operation that can be seen in a Community of Practice. Each Community of Practice can engage in the following activities, in pursuit of the common good:

- Problem Solving
- Requests for information
- Seeking experience
- Reusing assets
- Coordination and strategy
- Building an Argument
- Growing confidence
- Discussing developments
- Documenting documents
- Projects
- Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps

BRIDGE's experience of running CoPs has shown that groups engage in all of the above activities, at any one time. Wenger and Trayner say: The diversity of types of communities across different sectors has shown that there is no one-recipe-fits-all, despite some of the claims that are made about them. Here are some of the assertions or "myths" that have won some acclaim, in part due to the interpretation of early theoretical writing about them.

Communities of practice are always self-organising
False. Some communities do self-organise and are very effective. But most communities need some cultivation to be sure that members get high value for their time.

There are no leaders in a true community of practice
Mostly false. In many communities of practice decisions need to be taken, conditions need to be put in place; strategic conversations need to be had. Not all members see value in being involved in these processes. Whether you call them leaders, co-ordinators, or stewards, someone needs to do it – and it is as well to recognise them for the role they play.

True communities of practice are informal
False. There are many informal communities of practice. And there are many formal ones too. The more intentionally they are used for developing the strategic capability of an organisation or a cause, the more likely they are to have to go through some formal process to be recognised as such.

The role of a Community of Practice is to share existing knowledge
Partially true. The experience people have to share is clearly important. But Communities of Practice also innovate and solve problems. They invent new practices, create new knowledge, define new territory, and develop a collective and strategic voice.

It is too difficult to measure the impact of Communities of Practice
Mostly false. It may be difficult to attribute with 100% certainty the activities of a CoP to a particular outcome. You can, however, build a good case using quantitative and qualitative data to measure different types of value created by the community and trace how members are changing their practice and improving performance as a result.

Good facilitation is all it takes to get members to participate
False. Artful facilitation is very important. But there are many other reasons why people may not participate. The domain must be relevant and a priority to members. The value of participation usually needs to be recognised by the organisation otherwise members will not bother. Members need to see results of their participation and have a sense that they are getting something out of it. Good facilitation can help to make this visible, but is not the main reason why people participate.

Communities of Practice are harmonious places
Maybe. But if they are totally conflict free, you should be concerned that groupthink may be settling in or voices being silenced. More important, and usually quite difficult to achieve, is that differences are discussable and that they contribute to the learning.

There is a technology that is best for CoPs
False. There may be, but we haven't found it yet. The online universe is cluttered with spaces that nobody uses. It's also full of sites that are called a CoP, even if no-one is there! A tool or technology is as good as it is useful to the people who use it. And a forum is simply a forum until it becomes occupied by a Community of Practice.

Communities of Practice are the solution to everything
False. Communities of Practice don't substitute teams or networks or other joint enterprises. Each has its own place in the overall ecology of the learning system. Wenger and Trayner say: In recent developments of the theory we talk about landscapes of practice, and of creating different types of social learning spaces that open up new opportunities for developing learning capability.

So the picture of a CoP is beginning to emerge. You can assume that your facilitation is important but that in itself is not enough. A guided intervention is needed but the experience of the facilitator to take the group along the path it chooses is essential.

To summarise
Characteristics of a CoP
- There is a shared vision and shared values
- There is an acknowledgement that there is a collective responsibility for learners' learning
- The CoP offers group, as well as individual opportunities for learning
- Reflective, professional enquiry is central to the way the CoP works

- Openness, networking between members and partnerships are evident
- The CoP can represent the views of organisations, not just individuals
- There is mutual trust, respect and support for development

A Community of Practice is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all learners' learning.

HOW DOES IT BEGIN AND DEVELOP

- Individuals are brought together around a common cause or theme and because they have decided to participate, or because someone suggests it to them. They all must want to be part of the CoP and to commit to working together.
- The facilitator helps the CoP to identify key issues to discuss, usually something that affects all members, or a key issues emerge from the group very quickly
- As trust of the facilitator and trust between members develops so does the dynamic of the CoP – sharing becomes more frequent
- The CoP adopts reflective practice as a technique and is able to use it to reflect on what is needed in their environments
- Discussions outside of the CoP is not seen as a threat – collaboration grows

WHAT ARE THE STAGES OF GROWTH?
- Trust is very evident between all
- Discussion on internal and personal issues becomes a norm; sharing of challenges is common
- Reflection deepens and 'blaming others and passivity' changes to 'what can I do?'
- Sharing of resources is common – collaboration grows
- More problems are solved through a collective think tank and support
- Inclusive membership and confidentiality creates a sense of ownership and belonging – people want to be part of the CoP and say so

Process Facilitation

A process facilitator is a person who has to not only work with a predefined group of individuals but also be in a position to discuss what is happening in a particular education area and also with the staff of BRIDGE. BRIDGE uses feedback reflection session to continuously sharpen the skills of their facilitators. This requires the designated person to have a range of skills. The table below lists the requisite characteristics.

Please rate yourself against this list and then reflect on what you ticked off with others. Get a colleague to give you feedback on your ratings.

Characteristics	YES	NO	SOMETIMES
I have an in-depth knowledge of education policies, including Whole School Development			
I have experience of working with the education department at a District level			
I have experience of working in an NGO and dealing with process facilitation with senior educationalists			
I have strong listening skills and can interpret what is being said within the context so as to construct meaning			
I use empathy appropriately			
I have good analytical and synthesising skills to focus the discussion			
I am able to interpret group dynamics correctly			
I understand the various systems in a school and how they integrate			
People trust me			
I am a confident person			
I can give objective feedback			
I have a high level of EQ to be able to deal with unacceptable behaviour in a group			
I have good time management skills			
I can pace activities within the time limits and adjust if needed			
I am sensitive to people needs in workshops			
I prepare for all workshop in a thorough manner and take facilitation seriously			
I am not afraid of conflict			
I can negotiate my way through potential conflict situations in a group			
I am not prejudiced			
I can write a reflective report on a facilitation process that is accurate and meaningful			
I am utterly confidential when I need to be			
I can be patient in the appropriate situation			
I am able to deal constructively with participants who challenge my competence and authority			
I can differentiate between relevant and irrelevant participants' comments and deal with them appropriately			
I can admit to mistakes and am not defensive in group situations			
All appropriate comments in a workshop are valued and considered			
I have an ability to build cooperation and sharing which in turn can lead to collective decision making			