



STRONGER. SMARTER. TOGETHER.

HOW CAN A DIGITAL COMMUNITY OF
PRACTICE HELP YOUR ORGANIZATION?

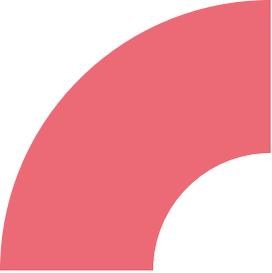


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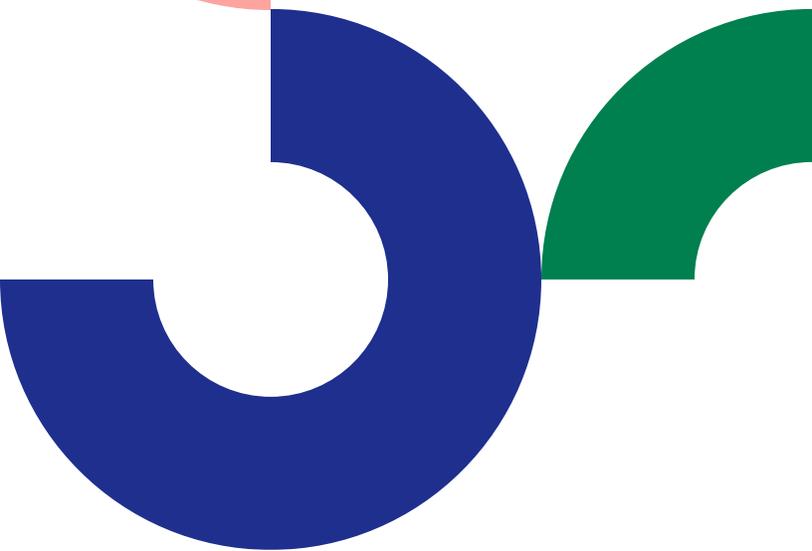
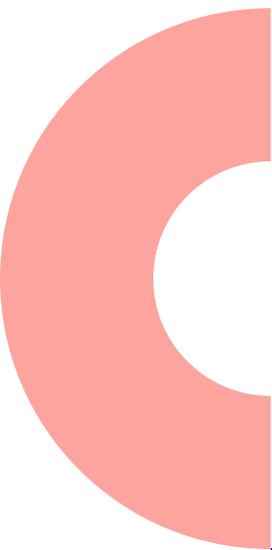
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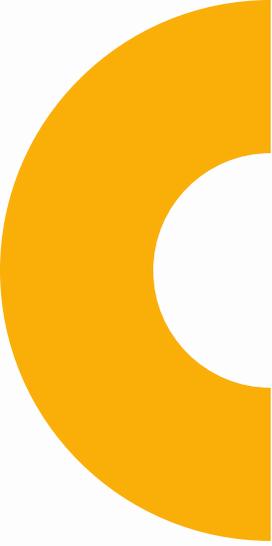
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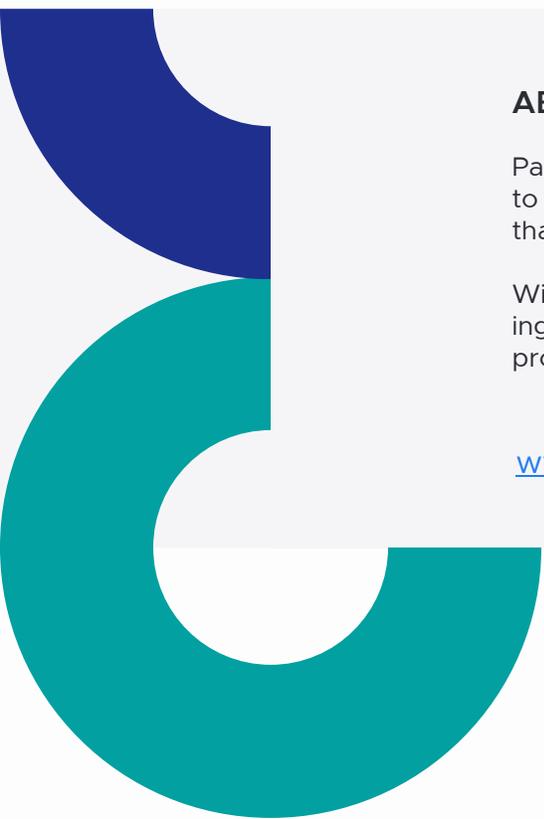
WHAT'S YOUR COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

Maybe you're a creator who's hungry to learn. You have a unique perspective to share and a hunch that others want to join.

Perhaps you're an entrepreneur or business executive. You want to improve capacity while building a meaningful culture of professional learning.

You're an advocate or nonprofit leader. You want to advance a mission or movement with a big tent and lots of moving parts.

In the pages that follow, we explore how a community of practice (CoP) can be a driver of organizational performance, individual learning and social impact. You'll hear from people using CoPs across business, nonprofit and education sectors. We hope that this publication will inspire you to elevate your passions or professional pursuits through building a CoP.



ABOUT PARTICIPATE, INC.

Participate's comprehensive digital platform and services are designed to support and operationalize Communities of Practice (CoPs) so that organizations and individuals can learn and work better together.

With Participate, you can level up your organization's professional learning and development efforts, create CoPs, promote collaboration, boost productivity and certify achievements through digital credentials.

www.participate.com



DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

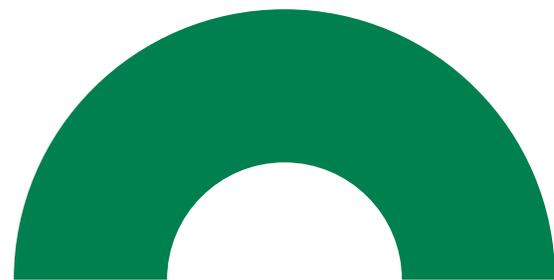
The idea isn't new. For 80,000 years, we (Homo sapiens) have relied on each other to learn, work and gain knowledge. Superior social skills, selfless cooperation and introspection are uniquely human traits.

So what's new? The term communities of practice (CoPs) is now used in an organizational context. Its application has been widely studied and evaluated to focus on measuring different levels of impact and outcomes:

- Knowledge management
- Strategic initiatives
- Upskilling and reskilling
- Industry-focused training

A definition: 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.'

Says who? The anthropologists Etienne Wenger, Beverly Trayner and Martin de Laat introduced the concept in a [seminal paper in 2011](#), establishing a methodology for measuring the value and efficacy of CoPs.



A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE HAS THREE DISTINCT ELEMENTS:



Domain:

a shared interest, concern, passion and/or goal



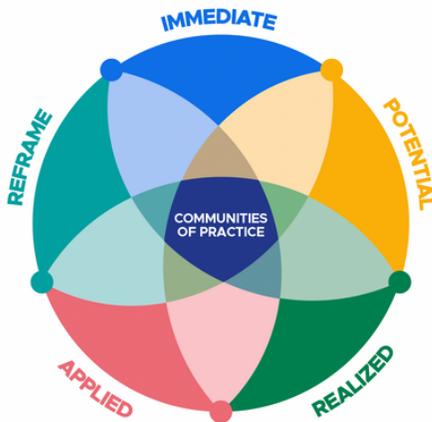
Practice:

the retrieval and application of new skills and knowledge



Community:

virtual gatherings, social media groups, discussion forums



MEASURING VALUE

Is it worth it? It's a question that drives your decision-making process.

For professional learning to be more than a box-checking exercise, organizations must understand the return on investment of their commitment.

At Participate, our multidimensional model for efficacy and evaluation is based on Wenger-Trayner's social theory research. This approach outlines a series of 'value creation cycles' to identify and assess contributions of high-performing communities. The integrated nature of the five cycles, illustrated below, should all be considered and not necessarily in any particular order.

What does this look like in action? Let's hear from Dr. Andrew Tagg, an emergency room physician who helped develop a globally renowned website and community for healthcare professionals called [Don't Forget The Bubbles](#) (DFTB). The example is outlined on the next page.

VALUE CREATION CYCLE

IMMEDIATE VALUE

Brief online exchanges that could include sharing a quick technology tip, advice or a link to resources.

POTENTIAL VALUE

Knowledge capital that can be put to good use in the future. Stronger relationships, access to resources or new skills.

APPLIED VALUE

The application of knowledge in a specific situation, leading to practical changes. This can include experimenting with new approaches or using resources to refine a procedure.

REALIZED VALUE

Evidence of performance improvement. Examples include when the application of shared resources improves your presentations or when the use of templates increases your team's efficiency.

REFRAMING VALUE

When specialized knowledge prompts a paradigm shift. This could include re-framing organizational strategies and team goals, proposing new metrics for performance.

DON'T FORGET THE BUBBLES (DFTB) CASE EXAMPLE

A small group of young doctors gather to share study notes to better prepare for medical exams.

This small group starts curating and organizing study notes. They share the best ones and create an online space for collaboration research and information gathering.

As the DFTB community grows, the co-founders experiment with new approaches for convening medical minds. They host live events, conferences, and seminars and develop more formal educational resources and online learning experiences.

The DFTB community designs online courses to help medical teams run more efficiently and develops an editorial process for publishing high-quality articles to meet audience's demands.

What started as a way to help junior physicians study for exams has transformed into a community for medical professionals and caretakers to learn about and access up-to-date information in the medical field.

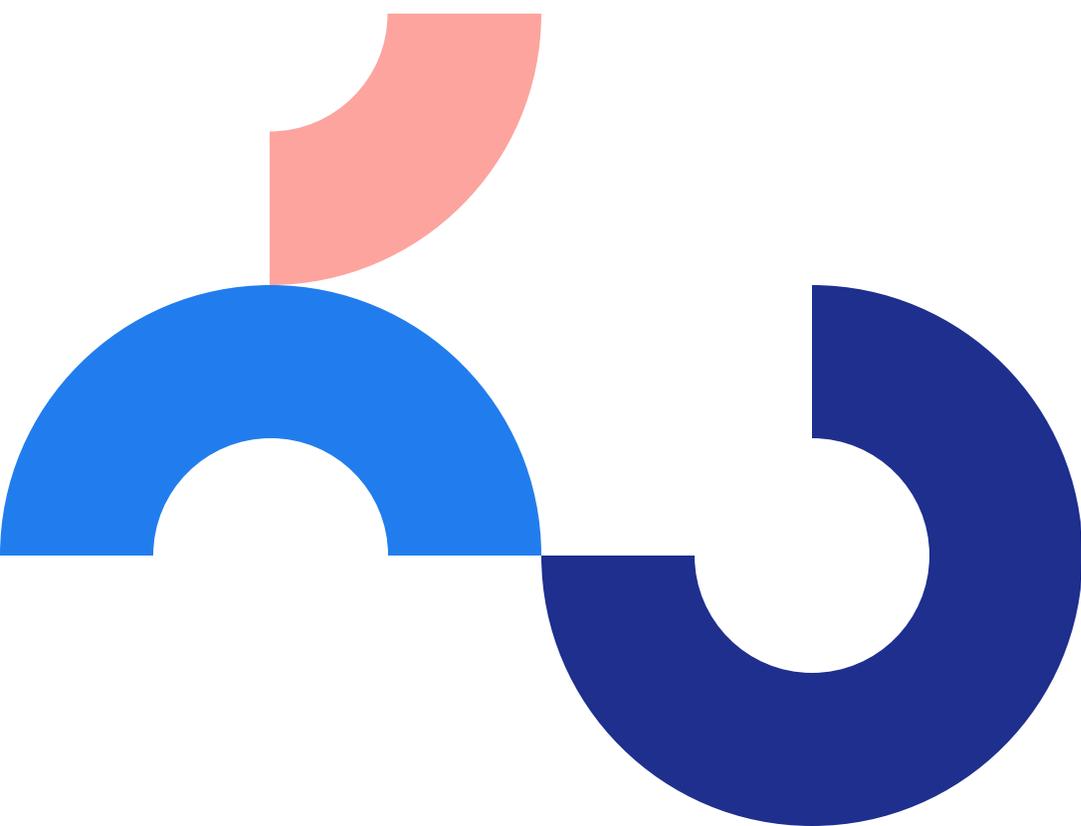
WHY PARTICIPATE?

STEPS TO BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

For 10+ years, we (Participate, that is) have served as the platform for hundreds of Communities of Practice where thousands of people learn and work better together.

Over time, we've developed a unique approach.

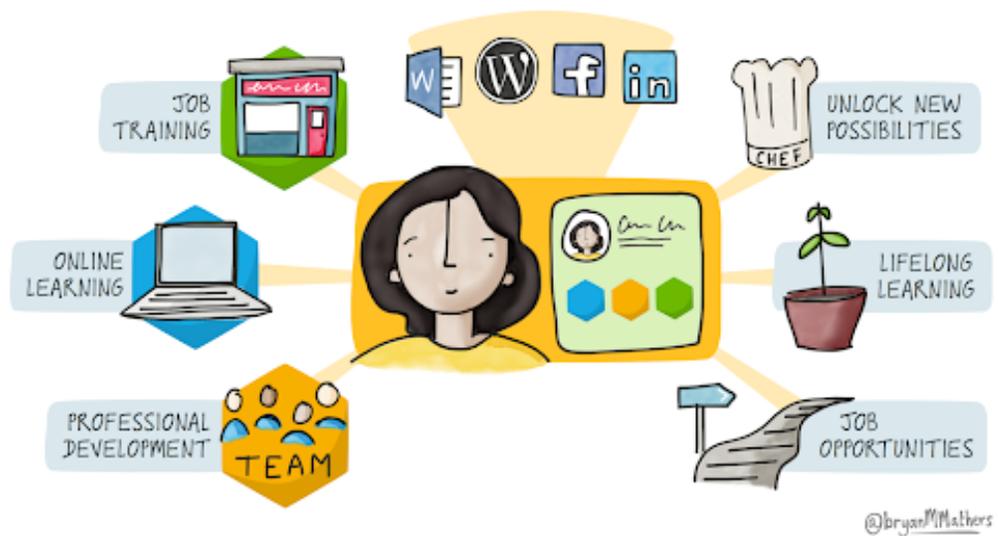
- **A Platform to Build on:** A simple but powerful digital foundation that supports customization and room to grow.
- **Learning Design Expertise:** Deep knowledge and experience in social learning and community engagement; to design high-quality professional learning experiences.
- **Tools to Engage:** Intentionally designed tools and features to integrate with common apps and optimize engagement at different phases of a member's journey.



WE LEARN BY DOING.

In partnership with the We Are Open Collective (WAO), we also seek to share knowledge and document processes to inform the future of CoPs. In a recent [essay, WAO Founder Doug Belshaw](#) outlines several actionable steps to design, build and engage a highly effective Community of Practice.

- **Gather:** Bring people together. Work on something together. Get people talking.
- **Welcome:** Bring new people into the community. Foster a sense of belonging for all. Establish guidelines and expectations.
- **Cultivate:** Create leadership opportunities. Distribute responsibilities. Don't forget to celebrate!
- **Change:** Address systems by both leveraging and resisting existing power structures.





INVESTING IN COMMUNITY FOR IMPACT

In the following pages, we highlight how several organizations have used Participate's CoPs to:

- **Build** a business and transform organizational professional learning and employee engagement strategies.
- **Create** customized solutions for purpose-driven corporate clients.
- **Transform** a decades-old professional learning model for K-12 teachers.
- **Train, upskill, and certify** early childcare providers to advance equity and improve learning outcomes.



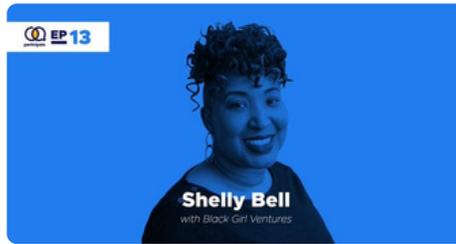
BLACK GIRL VENTURES

OPENING DOORS FOR WOMEN TO
GROW AS LEADERS



[Black Girl Ventures](#) is dedicated to creating access to social and financial capital for Black and Brown women-identifying founders and entrepreneurs. Founded in 2016 as a pitch competition to fund new businesses, BGV has raised \$5 million for over 300 women-led companies and built a community of over 20,000 women entrepreneurs and creators.

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD AND POWERING ENTREPRENEURSHIP



Shelly Omilâdè “Omi” Bell found her calling in 2016: to level the playing field for women founders and entrepreneurs. To dismantle the barriers, Bell is leveraging the powerful principles of **communities of practice (CoP)**.

After working as an educator, patent examiner, spoken word artist, print shop owner and computer scientist, Bell saw venture capital as ripe for disruption. For generations, America’s black and brown communities have been disproportionately shut out from the social and financial capital that helps promising startups achieve long-term growth.

What began as an in-person community organized around poetry slams, brunches and small gatherings has evolved into a national organization with a presence in at least a dozen major markets. To meet demand, Black Girl Ventures (BGV) has developed three programs: a leadership fellowship, a pitch program and mentorship for HBCU students and graduates.

THE CHALLENGE: MORE THAN AN LMS

As someone who never quite fit in at a traditional workplace, Bell says she always seeks big solutions to big problems.

Bell was seeking a technology tool to help her scale BGV’s Change Agent Fellowship, at the time an in-person leadership development program for women in local business communities. She was in the process of creating a standardized curriculum for an online toolkit to accompany the high-demand local program events when the pandemic forced her to completely rethink how her team could deliver the program.

She wanted to empower BGV community members to learn from and connect with one another through virtual mentorship and facilitated conversations. She knew she needed more than an online learning management system.

WHY PARTICIPATE? EXPERTISE AND PARTNERSHIP

Through her research and review of options, she found Participate and realized that a digital Communities of Practice model could be applied to not only scale her online curriculum, but to also encourage collaboration and spur innovation among the network of women.

Bell worked closely with Participate’s partnership expert design team to bring the fellowship program to life online. BGV’s interactive modules connected early-stage entrepreneurs and were tailored for cohorts in different cities and varied needs.

Bell also liked the idea of introducing BGV members to a world of online learning.

“It was an opportunity to learn other things from other people who were hosting open communities on Participate.”

Today, the Change Agent Fellowship's Jetpack for Leaders curriculum is a robust 9-month virtual skills development program facilitated by industry leaders.

"I'm big on customer service, and the Participate team is the real MVP. They've taken our feedback on building out modules and it has been great."

THE NEXT CHAPTER: CREATING A SENSE OF WORKPLACE BELONGING

"Now it is so much bigger than that."

After the successful launch of the online fellowship program curriculum, Bell applied Participate

CoPs to other aspects of her growing organization.

BGV partnered with Participate to overhaul BGV's new employee onboarding and internal communications processes through interactive learning experiences. When new team members join, they learn about the organization's philosophy and values, internal organization structures and norms—and even learn how to pitch an idea using the same training principles that BGV's founders learn about.

Ultimately, Bell says Participate has given her a way to build a culture that allows people to be their authentic selves.

"It's become a sort of repository for how we keep our internal culture moving."

BGV PRESENTS

Change Agent Fellowship

**a totally unique 9-month leadership skills
development program**



COLORADO STATE PARENTS COALITION / PASO



MICRO-CREDENTIALS WITH A MISSION



The [Colorado Statewide Parents Coalition](#)'s mission is to build power and support a movement in marginalized communities to help families and providers be the strongest and best advocates for their children to succeed in school and beyond.

MICRO-CREDENTIALS WITH A MISSION

In 1980, the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition (CSPC) was established to help Latino families ensure their children can receive a high-quality public education. Programming that began as informal conversations about sharing resources, overcoming barriers to access and navigating school systems as non-English speakers has continually evolved and adapted to serve its mission.



“Everything we do is about closing opportunity gaps in education,” said Lorena Garcia, CSPC’s executive director. “To do that, we build power and movement in marginalized communities.”

To fulfill that mission, CSPC has developed a training and credentialing program for early childcare providers of Latino children, who make up about one-third of Colorado’s public school population. The program, known as PASO, or Providers Advancing Student Outcomes, was created in response to research showing that glaring opportunity gaps and inequities begin far earlier than when students enter the K-12 school system.

Early childcare providers in Latino communities are often made up of informal networks known as Friends, Families, and Neighbors (FFN). From grandmothers and aunts to next door neighbors and best friends, FFN providers play

critical roles in childhood development. Yet they often receive no formal training or recognition for their work. In partnership with Participate, PASO has built an online community of practice (CoP) comprised of FFN providers to support and guide one another in service to their communities.

THE CHALLENGE: ADAPTING A WORKFORCE TRAINING PROGRAM FOR AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

In Colorado, PASO has become one of the most impactful, proven workforce training programs for early education providers. The intensive 120-hour comprehensive curriculum covers the knowledge, skills and competencies aligned with the research-based principles of early education. Since its inception in 2006, 1,700 Spanish-speaking providers have successfully completed the program, which allows them to apply for a nationally-recognized Child Development Associate credential.

“Licensed child care centers send their teachers to PASO because they see that it is of such high quality,” Garcia said. “PASO has always been seen as a workforce development support system.”

When the pandemic forced child care centers to shutter in spring 2020, PASO quickly shifted its course from in-person training to online sessions, but a variety of challenges emerged immediately. Varying levels of tech access, skills and schedules provided significant blockers for accessing the courses.

CSPC knew it needed to identify a partner to help transition what was an intensive place-based, Spanish-



language training program into a viable online community that would adequately meet the needs of its community.

"Before the pandemic, participants would come for two days a week, spend four hours in class and then they were gone," said Garcia.

"...we wanted to reduce the Zoom fatigue – while still making sure that our providers were learning everything they needed to earn the PASO credential."

Garcia saw an opportunity to bring together FFN providers across the state of Colorado in a more meaningful way to more adequately meet community needs.

WHY PARTICIPATE: EXPERT DESIGN FOR EFFECTIVE UPSKILLING

PASO's program coordinators worked with Participate's online learning experts to redesign the curriculum into modules that aligned with research-based principles of online learning and Communities of Practice.

The course redesign focused on promoting a self-paced learning

schedule, creating a more welcoming learning environment, and integrating multiple modalities of content. The new digital course was organized into six courses that each culminated in earning a digital micro-credential.

Participate's team also created a custom learning experience tailored to Spanish language learners; Participate led the development of instructional pathways for synchronous and asynchronous learning and connection within the courses. Instead of disjointed sets of tools and long Zoom video sessions, course facilitators offer formative feedback and invite course-takers to actively engage with each other. After launching with one pilot cohort, demand quickly led to three more.

"It's been such a wonderful tool for us," said Garcia. "Because the first pilot was so successful, we decided to ditch the pilot and just roll out everything right away because it's been such a good platform."

THE NEXT CHAPTER: STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS AND COMMUNITY

"The most exciting thing about this is that it also allows us to maintain a connection with all the providers who go through the course," said Garcia. "They're still connected through the PASO Community on Participate. They get announcements and can participate in discussions."

Garcia says switching over to an online community of practice has, in effect, advanced CSPC's mission of closing the opportunity gap—for students and providers alike.

“Having a space that’s unique to the providers who have a shared learning experience is really special.”

An added value for individual participants, Garcia said, has been the exposure to the kind of online earning experience they may engage in if they pursue a college degree.

“When it comes to technology, especially in marginalized communities, we need to encourage technological skills development. By being able to have a platform like Participate for folks who have never done anything like this, it might be hard at the beginning, but when they get over the hump, the benefit definitely outweighs the cost.”



The logo for doGoodery, featuring the word "do" in a small, lowercase, sans-serif font, followed by "Goodery" in a larger, lowercase, sans-serif font. The "G" in "Goodery" is significantly larger and more prominent than the other letters. The logo is set against a white circular background.

DOGOODERY

PARTNERS IN SCALING SOCIAL IMPACT

As a full-service social impact agency, [DoGoodery](#) specializes in helping brands achieve their community and social impact goals. The small but mighty team that makes up the agency provides customized strategies and services to clients through a wide range of expertise in critical impact areas.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach when you sign on with DoGoodery. Clients receive high-touch treatment from a team that prides itself on delivering full-service projects. At its core, DoGoodery is based on the idea that values-driven brands need specialized support and expertise to create positive social impact.

THE CHALLENGE: BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE TO SUPPORT SOCIAL IMPACT STRATEGIES

Professional learning is one social impact area where DoGoodery has seen increased client interest. In response, Founder and CEO Christiane Maertens has developed the agency's **Learn, Engage, Act, and Grow!** Portfolio and built a team with decades of dynamic experience in classrooms, as researchers, and in the private sector.

“We’re educators that understand the business of learning,” says Lizabeth Fogel, Ed.D., VP of Learning, Strategy and Development, who oversees the portfolio.

Fogel says companies that work with DoGoodery see corporate social responsibility as something much more than a line item on their budgets. They seek transformative impact and meaningful experiences that have long-term benefits for business and brand.

To support this need, Fogel sought out virtual spaces where members of a client’s target audience could learn and work together in a community of practice.

“It’s something we talk about with our clients. How do we create these communities of practice and show value through literally building community?”

WHY PARTICIPATE? A SOLUTIONS PARTNER

DoGoodery first partnered with Participate when the client specifically wanted to build an online course series with a community

space where members could continue to learn and grow with each other.

“We knew that we were not going to build a tool like that in-house at DoGoodery,” Fogel says. “Being able to bring people together, find solutions and execute is where we have seen success.”

Clients include multinational Fortune 100 corporations seeking to upskill employees across the globe. Another is a data-driven philanthropic organization seeking to train the next generation of museum educators.

Fogel says the Participate platform provides her team with tools and features that are accessible and customizable. And, she says, DoGoodery has been able to rely on the Participate team’s expertise, pulling the learning design team into client calls to plan projects and answer questions.

“The tools are super easy to use. The team is super easy to work with. Everyone, everything is user friendly,” Fogel said. “For the organizations we’re working with, having options has given us a ton of flexibility to start small and grow.”

THE NEXT CHAPTER: GRASSROOTS DEMAND FOR SOCIAL IMPACT

Maertens says that she still encounters a lot of barriers when it comes to making the case for social impact investments. But she says that there has been an undeniable shift in the expectations and demands from both consumers and employees. Young professionals are demanding, from the bottom up, that the companies they

work for show their social impact.

“There's just so much benefit in investing in doing the right thing,” Maertens says.



PARTICIPATE SOLUTIONS PARTNERSHIPS

Participate Solutions Partnerships are specially-designed partnerships to support organizations and consultants to incorporate Participate offerings into a solution for their clients or partners. Partner organizations include agencies such as DoGoodery that want to realize the value of communities of practice for their customers and clients.



NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

A TEACHER-LED TRANSFORMATION

[National Writing Project](#) was founded as a professional development network that valued the leadership and experience of great teachers—and promoted knowledge-sharing in a community of practitioners to advance the teaching of writing. Today, NWP has grown to 165 sites serving teachers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands and has garnered numerous accolades. The National Endowment for the Humanities stated that NWP is “by far the most efficient cost-effective project in the history of the Endowment's support for elementary and secondary education programs.”

CHARTING A COURSE FOR THE FUTURE

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a widely-recognized K-12 professional development innovator with a simple yet radical vision: Teachers teaching teachers. Through Participate and communities of practice (CoP), NWP is embracing digital learning transformation to reach more teachers and advance DEI strategies.

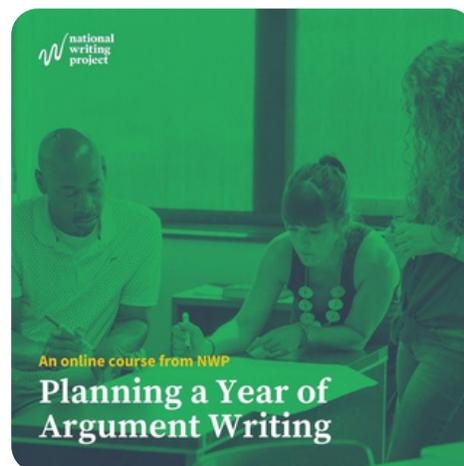
In recent years NWP realized that to be equitable and accessible, it could no longer rely solely on in-person programs. In order to meet this goal, NWP began to look for ways to innovate through online learning opportunities.

THE CHALLENGE: INVEST IN INNOVATION

Innovation was already part of the NWP fiber. In 2011, through a federal Investing in Innovation grant, NWP developed and expanded its College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP), designed and proven to improve students' argument writing through intensive teacher professional development, instructional resources, and formative assessment. NWP senior program associate Rachel Bear was charged with ensuring the organization's C3WP dissemination plan benefitted teachers and administrators.

Nearly ten years later, "Our goal is to put this [knowledge] into the hands of any teacher who wants it," says Bear. **"The design had to be about equity and access for teachers. We knew we couldn't create just another website."**

NWP partnered with Participate to design and build the organization's professional development courses in smaller, more digestible chunks, enabling participants to complete modules on their own time and tailor them to their prior knowledge or level of engagement with C3WP.



The NWP-Participate team initially created a four-week course on *Teaching Routine Argument Writing*, which they designed to help teachers develop year-long writing practices. The course pilot launched in Spring 2021 with 55 teachers. In less than a year, NWP designed and built 15 courses with Participate to engage a community of 700+ educators.

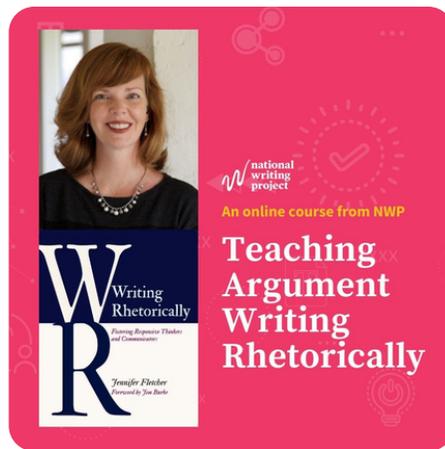
"For many teachers, these online courses in Participate are their first experience with the National Writing Project," says Bear. "They are filling a unique need by providing professional development to teachers who don't otherwise have access to it."

In fact, through its open course offered on the Participate Community Platform, [Approach to Teaching Argument Writing](#), NWP is able to broadly engage new teachers and school administrators and generate interest in taking additional paid NWP courses.

WHY PARTICIPATE? STRENGTHENING PRACTICE THROUGH COMMUNITY

A key principle of NWP's professional development is that teachers put their learning into practice within their own classrooms. The NWP approach aligned well with Participate's commitment to designing, building and engaging vibrant communities of practice (CoP) that help members learn better together.

According to Bear, the course design team "was looking for an online space that would allow us to create the kind of instruction that we could do with course participants in a face-to-face setting."



"NWP's course designers and facilitators have found the platform to be intuitive and easy to use," Bear says. "And we've received overwhelmingly positive feedback

from teachers who have taken our courses."

THE NEXT CHAPTER: DIGITAL CREDENTIALS

The promise of Participate is in its digital badging ecosystem, Bear says. Participate's digital badges clearly articulate credentialing criteria that are important to school district leaders and administrators. Course expectations, documentation and validation of successful completion are among the many criteria included in Participate's digital badges.

NWP works with Participate to design customized digital badges that teachers earn to satisfy a variety of certification requirements. In a Michigan school district, for example, teachers simply enter coupon codes to access NWP's online offerings, which have been approved through the district's professional development office.

"That credential criteria is really important," said Bear. "The digital credentials provide teachers with a way to collect and share evidence of their learning from the courses."

"The basic goal of the National Writing Project is to support teachers in teaching writing and to support students in becoming better writers. The Participate platform in particular is reaching teachers who can't access this content in a different way."