BRIDGE survey on online communities of practice

July 2020

What have we learned about running online CoPs during Covid-19?

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BRIDGE Communities of Practice (CoPs)

One of the ways in which BRIDGE connects people and drives collaboration in education is through convening and facilitating communities of practice (CoPs). BRIDGE CoPs are multi-stakeholder groups with a common interest who come together to share ideas, knowledge and practices in their fields. In the five focus areas shown in the graphic, we currently run the following CoPs:

- Early Childhood Development (ECD) CoP (national and provincial)
- Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) CoP (national and provincial)
- Post-school Access CoP (national)
- Maths & Science CoP (national)
- Initial Teacher Education (ITE) CoP (national)
- Early Grade Reading CoP (national)
- Principals Upfront
- Principals CoPs (closed)
- South African Extraordinary Schools Coalition (SAESC)

BRIDGE CoPs before Covid-19

Our CoP meetings have traditionally taken place in face-to-face settings, and are structured according to certain principles. One purpose is to share information and build capacity: to this end, CoP meetings generally include a presentation (or more than one) on a topic of interest in the field. Crucially, however, CoP meetings aim to give all participants a voice, as well as opportunities to share their own concerns and practices, and to build relationships and collaborations through exchanges at CoP events. This is done through interactive group work, a particular facilitation methodology and networking opportunities. Numbers of participants in different CoP meetings can range from about eight to over 50 people. All information, presentations, ideas and debates (as well as contact information) are documented through Meeting Highlights which are shared with participants and on the BRIDGE website.

BRIDGE CoPs during Covid-19

BRIDGE had begun experimenting with online participation before Covid-19, with the aim of including those who could not physically attend because of geographical distance. CoP meetings were not, however, planned around active inclusion of online input or participation. With the onset of lockdown in March 2020, BRIDGE, like many other organisations, was forced to move all its activities online. Conducting CoPs online while retaining participative principles was challenging at first, but with practice we have been able to improve the experience through careful planning and

the use of various technology aids. Our preferred platform is Zoom, which offers breakaway rooms for group work, screen-sharing for presentations, a chat function for participant input, and various other functions. Mentimeter is a useful tool for gathering quick views and feedback to questions; and Jam Boards can support participatory group work. Jam Boards work as virtual flip charts on which people can draw ideas, post sticky notes and organise these thematically. As we learn about other digital tools and methodologies, we will continue to incorporate these into our online CoPs.

The key aim, however, is to preserve the nature and purpose of BRIDGE communities of practice. These are not webinars or online presentations. CoPs need to support genuine interaction and participation by members, ensuring that our goals of connecting people, and sharing knowledge and practice for the improvement of learning outcomes, continue to be met. For this reason, we felt the time was right to pause and gather feedback from our CoP members on our progress.

The survey: online meetings covered

The survey covers thirteen community of practice online meetings (convened at both national and provincial levels) held between 1 April and 3 July 2020. BRIDGE Principals CoPs are not included in this survey as they are closed CoPs and are of a different nature to open, multi-stakeholder CoPs.

COP MEETING	# OF PARTICIPANTS	# OF RESPONSES	COMMENTS
ECD National CoP 6 May	53	9	
ECD National CoP 20 May	37	9	The number of ECD CoPs in this period reflects the fact that BRIDGE was providing a forum for collaborative civil society submissions to government reflecting concerns about the lack of response on ECD during Covid-19. Sector specialists mostly attended both the provincial and national CoPs as these were all inter-related.
ECD KZN CoP 24 April	15	2	
ECD W Cape CoP 7 May	30	3	
ECD W Cape CoP 21 May	8	3	
M&E National CoP 17 March	53	9	The theme of monitoring project activities in the context of lockdown and school closures was carried through all three M&E CoPs; so here again some people attended both national and provincial CoPs.
M&E W Cape CoP 6 May	30	2	
M&E National CoP 27 May	57	10	
Joint ECD/ EGR CoP 28 May	60	4	This is the newest CoP, established in 2019.
ITE CoP 21 May	14	1	This is a small CoP focusing on teaching practice (work integrated learning) with university education departments.
ITE CoP 17 June	14	3	

| Maths & Science CoP 18 June | 52 | 13 | |
| SAESC CoP 2 July | 68 | 13 | This is the longest-running BRIDGE CoP and has been going since 2010. |

Table 1: CoP attendance and respondent numbers

The graph below shows the number of CoPs that a respondent may have attended over the period for review. Even though there were 39 respondents the total number of attended CoPs is higher. That is because a respondent may have attended more than one CoP.
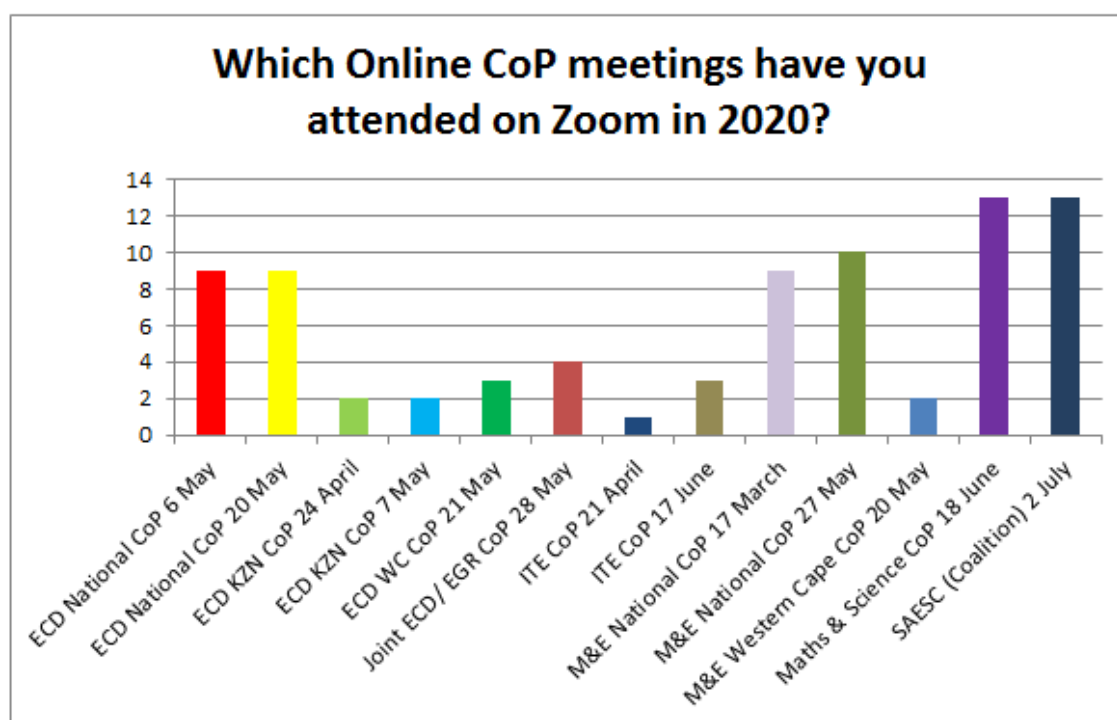
***Table 2: Breakdown of participant responses to survey in relation to attendance***

The survey: data limitations

The survey was sent out to 590 people, representing those who had RVSP'd to CoP invitations between April 2020 and July 2020. There were 39 respondents. The low response rate and the fact that people are commenting on different online CoP events mean that we can't make sweeping generalisations based on the survey, especially in relation to quantitative data. The following factors need to be kept in mind when reading the conclusions drawn.

- CoPs in different focus areas are not directly comparable due to the following:
    - CoPs are at different stages in their life cycles. More established CoPs tend to have a core group of regular attendees, while newer ones are still finding their target audience.
    - As shown in the table above, CoP participant numbers vary greatly between different CoPs. The dynamics in a large group of people, many of whom do not know

each other, differ substantially to those in a small group who have been meeting regularly.

- Regular or once-off attendance: regular participants will have a more informed base from which to respond to survey questions, in that they understand the CoP outcomes and methodology. If they have attended more than one CoP during this period, they would have a basis on which to assess BRIDGE's growth in online expertise. Some respondents only attended one CoP meeting in this period (these individuals may have been entirely new to BRIDGE CoPs, or may have been long-time CoP members who could only attend one CoP in their interest area).

Table 3: Breakdown of # of times attended
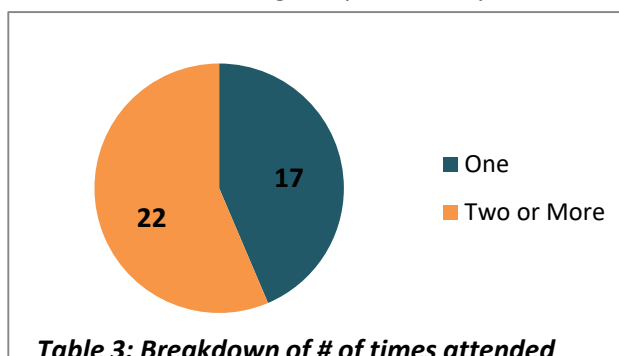
These factors mean that, while the survey can give us an illustrative sense of CoP participant views, there are too many variables in the respondent group to draw conclusions linked to any quantitative data. However, the 39 respondents gave rich commentary which informs the next section of this brief.

Lessons learned about online features

The open-ended responses to various questions in the survey gave us insight into what is working in our online CoP meetings, which areas are sometimes challenging, and views on different features of Zoom that have been used. In addition, there were some valuable insights and suggestions regarding facilitation and management of online CoPs. We have summarised common themes from responses under different categories of input, and included example quotes.

Zoom Features

| FEATURE	POSITIVE COMMENTS	PROVISOS
VIDEO	People like to see the facilitator and presenters, as it makes it easier to engage with them and focus on what they are saying. They also like to see others on the call as well even if they don't keep their videos on all the time. "It takes away from some of the impersonality of Zoom meetings." "Video improves the human connection." "I like to see who is in the room." "It is important to see people and not just names, also the essence of a COP is to engage	Video can interfere with connectivity for those with low band-width, or can use a lot of data.

	verbally and in writing, otherwise it becomes too much of a lecture style.”	
CHAT FUNCTION	The Chat function was highly rated as it allows people to participate and make their points even in large groups, or even if they don't get a chance to verbalise. Links to other resources or people's contact details can be immediately shared. *“Chat function allows people to have a voice …. and improves the quality of information sharing.”* *“If people use it properly, and there is someone dedicated to drawing attention to it, the chat can be a useful way of including other voices.”*	Sometimes Chats move too quickly and are hard to follow. There was some uncertainly as to whether comments in chats are always noted and responded to, and whether or not points made in Chats are saved and shared. (Relevant points from Chats are included in meeting highlight reports.) *“There needs to be etiquette around them, such as asking people not to write essays in the chat forum!!”*
BREAKAWAY ROOMS	The main advantage of breakaway rooms is that they allow for active engagement and participation rather than passive listening or writing on a Chat. Breakaway rooms promote intimacy and interaction. *“Quite daunting to be in a group with 80 people so the small groups allowed us to have a better discussion, ask questions, be heard.”* *“Break away rooms give platforms to communicate and share ideas into smaller groups and you get to know how other members practice their work during this time.”* *“Breakaway rooms are great for giving everyone a voice and for having rich discussions. More engaging to be involved in a conversation with a small group, versus downloading info from the sage on the stage.”* *“Breaks the monotony of looking at the same screen for a long time.”*	The only negative comment was to do with disruptions/ interrupted conversation when breakaway rooms transition to plenaries. It was noted that breakaway room discussions need to be properly facilitated. *“Breakaways need a prepared facilitator.”*
SCREEN SHARING	Screen sharing was generally seen as essential. It is useful to share the agenda at the start, and vital for presentations. It adds a visual element to the meetings.	N/A
JAM BOARDS	Jam Boards are seen as an innovative tool that allow for all voices to be heard, and the	Jam Boards can take time for people to access and learn to

	capturing of all ideas and perspectives. They are also time saving as everyone can put down their ideas at the same time. *"They allow for brainstorming".* *"Allow for better articulation of questions and a more manageable way to summarise questions."*	use if they haven't used them before. One person felt that Mentimeter was a more useful tool than Jam Boards.
FACILITATOR CONTROL TO 'MUTE' PARTICIPANTS	There was agreement that the facilitator needs some kind of control, especially in big meetings. The mute function allows the facilitator to manage the meeting, especially when there may be people who aren't used to online technology. *"Mute function allows us to focus on content."*	The only negative comments were about facilitators who don't use this function, and allow disruptive noise to continue.

Table 4: Comments on Zoom features

Number of participants

The question of whether or not to limit participation is challenging for BRIDGE. Most of our CoPs are multi-stakeholder and open access, and in the interests of sharing widely we would not want to limit numbers. On the other hand, quality can be compromised by large numbers of participants. In some cases, the answer to this conundrum lies in whether or not a CoP event has a defined purpose or goal which might shape the structure and desired target audience of a CoP. Most CoPs, however, are guided by the generic BRIDGE CoP outcomes, which are all to do with enabling sharing of knowledge and practice, and promoting collaboration and networking. BRIDGE CoP meetings vary greatly in number from about eight people to over 50; respondents were asked their views on how many people should attend. Survey responses were split as illustrated below.
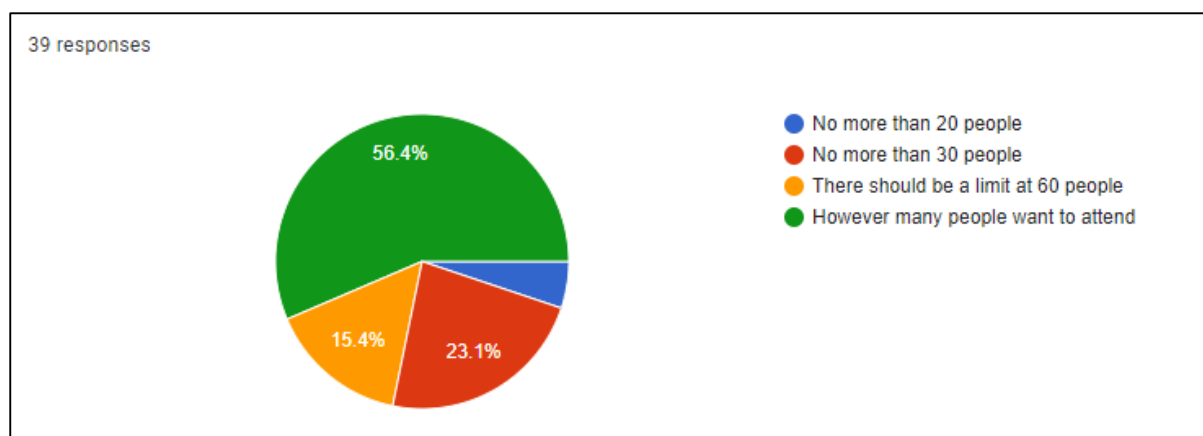
Table 5: Views on number of participants

Here is an illustrative sample of views expressed by respondents:

Some preferred smaller numbers …

- *"Having a large number serves no purpose as its about numbers and less focus on quality."*
- *"If there are too many people, there is little time to actually voice your opinion."*
- *"The quality of the call is sometimes affected by too many people. It also makes the group work and feedback longer with huge numbers of participants."*

Some were all for everyone …

- *"More people leads to better opportunities of experiencing something new and worthwhile listening to. Inclined to be better focused as well."*
- *"Bigger numbers may make meetings longer but if the system can support huge numbers, there's no reason to limit participation."*
- *"As many people as the WiFi can handle is good because we want the work of the CoP to travel far and wide, BUT, videos off for better streaming and the ability to mute background noise (it's disturbing)."*

Some had conditions ….

- *"If break away sessions are included in the structure of the COP session, then it can allow for no limit of participants. Break away groups can have a maximum of 10 participants so engagement and discussion can take place."*
- *"If there are greater numbers we MUST have breakaway rooms, otherwise we are all just spectators."*

And some had advice ….

"Yeah, this is a tough one. The more people, the less chance the audience actually gets to interact. I am inclined to say that we shouldn't limit the number of people, but then the meeting has to be carefully crafted/designed in a way that gets people to engage in a meaningful, structured and contained way. For example, with targeted questions, or votes/polls, or structure Q&A per topic limited by number of questions and time so that the conversation doesn't run away."

Length of meetings

Traditionally, BRIDGE face-to-face CoP meetings generally lasted four to five hours, including registration, tea and lunch. A key reason for the breaks has also been to provide CoP participants with opportunities to meet new people, greet old friends, and network on matters of interest. Online meetings obviously have a different structure, and are generally shorter.

To the question 'What do you think is the ideal duration of an online CoP', we had the following responses, with the favourite coming up as an online meeting of two hours.

Table 6: Views on online CoP duration
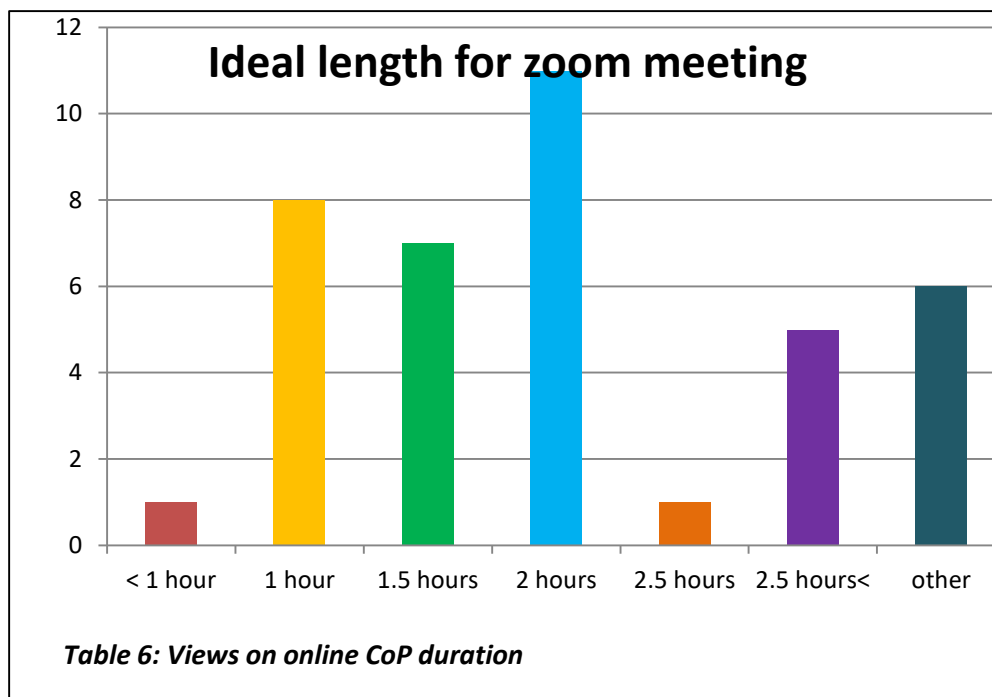
Lessons learned about facilitation and management of online CoPs

The survey asked for comment on the following:

> The BRIDGE CoP methodology takes a specific approach to hearing all voices, and promoting sharing, collaboration and networking. From your online experiences, what suggestions would you make regarding: (a) online group work; and (b) enabling networking during the meeting?
>
> Please share any other views you have on how BRIDGE CoPs have been conducted during Covid-19 in 2020. What has worked and what has not? Do you have any suggestions for BRIDGE going forward?

From all comments made throughout the survey, and from other anecdotal feedback, we have distilled the following 'lessons learned' around facilitation and management of online CoPs.

- A skilled facilitator is essential to manage the overall tone of the meeting, and the smooth transition from one activity to another.

- This also applies to facilitation of breakaway groups. These groups should not just be left to manage themselves (as we do in the more leisurely face-to-face CoPs) as too much time is wasted before someone takes the lead. Group facilitators can be drawn from CoP members but need to be well-briefed beforehand. Use group techniques and interactive tools so that

it is not only a few voices that dominate. It is also important that there is structured feedback to plenary from group work, otherwise the purpose of the group sharing is lost. If it is a big group with a number of smaller feedback loops, use a screen or whiteboard tool for summaries. Give facilitators enough time to prepare their feedback properly.

- Ensure that all CoP online protocols and techniques are clearly articulated at the start of the meeting:

  - Putting down names and organisations in the Chat on arrival.

  - Alerting people to protocols for speaking (stay on mute, raise hand, use Chat for questions etc.)

  - Forewarning people regarding breakaway rooms and group discussions.

  - Telling people that they will receive all presentations and links shared, so that they don't keep asking for these in the Chat.

- Networking online is difficult and sometimes dedicated online 'networking sessions' feel forced and unnatural. Networking tends to happen in breakaway rooms and group discussions IF enough time is allocated to these. Short breaks in the middle of the programme, and leaving the Zoom meeting open at the end of the programme, should be tried out more extensively.

- Allow 'private chat' so that people can network online and share contact information between each other if they want to.

Going forward

We asked repondents the following question: 'Going forward (assuming no Covid-19 social distancing required), what format would you like CoPs to take? Choose one option.'
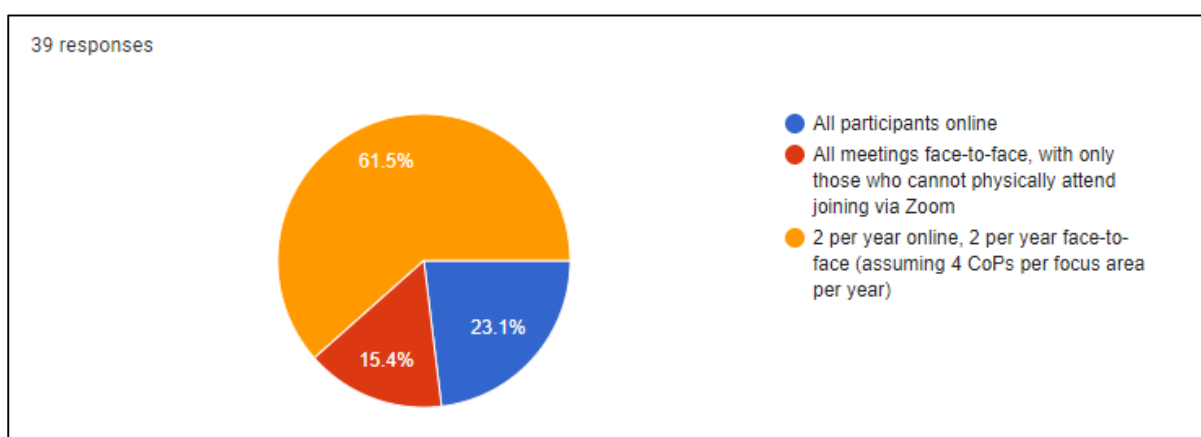
Table 7: Views on CoPs going forward

Clearly, most CoP members see the advantages and disadvantages of both online and face to face CoPs – hence the voting in favour of using both formats in the future. Two very different views are shown below.

BRIDGE has done very well to continue with its work under the very difficult circumstances of the pandemic by going online, but online work is a pale shadow of the work that BRIDGE does under normal circumstances. The online option is a distant second prize, in my book. Much is inevitably lost in the online version of communities of practice.	*"Online CoPs are convenient. They save time (travelling to and from venues, not starting on time); you may accommodate more participants; no need to book conference venues and provide refreshements. Online meetings can save costs and get many people on board.*

And the last word …

"I am glad that we're not stopping to meet, it is really about emotional support as well."