FOSTERING ONLINE COMMUNITY

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In an online or blended learning course, as in face-to-face courses, the creation of a sense of community is critical to learning. An online community of practice includes the educators and all learners enrolled on a course and has a social purpose as well as serving educational needs. It facilitates sharing knowledge and resources, and collective sense-making and problem-solving.

"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."
Wenger-Trayner, 2015

WHY HAVE AN ONLINE COMMUNITY?

"A constructivist learning environment […] is one that is learner-centered, where the focus is on learning rather than teaching, and where active learning and cooperation through discussion take place."
Rovai 2004, p.90

An online community provides a safe space for learners to engage in this discussion, interacting with their peers and the educator, collaboratively building knowledge and understanding, and engaging in sense-making which contributes to deeper learning. It provides an opportunity to extend discussions beyond the classroom, allowing time for reflection and further thinking on topics.

Building an online community, whether in a fully online course or in a blended learning context, helps overcome the sense of isolation that students may experience, especially when they are separated geographically and have few opportunities to meet. It also facilitates cross-campus discussions, contributing to learners being exposed to different ideas and cultures across the globe.

In an online environment the building of a community requires planning and consistent effort, but the rewards are increased student engagement and retention, consolidation of knowledge and deeper understanding, and improved completion rates.

HOW DO YOU FOSTER AN ONLINE COMMUNITY?

Creating an online community

Online communities are often constructed via discussion forums on the VLE (virtual learning environment) but may also involve small-group activities, webinars or other online interaction. Regardless of how the community is set up, key principles to fostering engagement apply.

- **Be clear about the purpose of the community.** For example, it may be intended as a place for the educator and students to get to know each other, or where students can ask questions or ask for help, or to facilitate thinking about and discussing particular topics, or for problem-solving as a group.

- **Agree guidelines or 'rules of engagement'.** This ensures that the community is a safe and welcoming space for everyone on the course. It is more effective when these guidelines are co-created by those in the community rather than being provided for them. These should cover using clear language and being respectful of difference, whether of opinion, culture, religion, gender, race, sexuality, dis/ability, age, politics or other factors.

- **Build community.** A welcome message can be a useful means to set the tone for the community or discussion. A warm-up activity or icebreaker can also help build community through shared activity. This might be a small problem-solving activity, or it might involve asking students to introduce themselves by saying who they are, where they study, what their interests are, or to post an image that says something about them.

Here is an example of an icebreaker question:

Who do you consider is a good leader and why?

At the end of the course the activity was revisited with the question:

Has your perception of what makes a good leader changed? If so, how?

The role of the educator

The educator may play a variety of roles which may change or reduce over time as the community develops. This may include acting as:

- **Instructor, facilitator or moderator.** Each of these roles contributes to creating and maintaining an environment in which students feel comfortable and supported.

- **Role model within the community.** It is important to model good community behaviour and online etiquette.

- **A positive presence in the community.** Let learners see your personality and share your enthusiasm for your subject as well as your knowledge and expertise.

Facilitating engagement

Regular engagement in community discussions or activities will help to build knowledge and shared understanding. Sometimes this engagement requires facilitation:

- **Encourage students to respond to each other**, answer questions, debate with each other and share ideas. Educators don't have to reply to everything. A breathing space allows learners to respond to and help each other, which helps build community. The right moment to intervene is if you feel that learners have misunderstood the topic, or that the discussion is going too far off topic. Good discussions are more likely when comments are positive and encouraging rather than negative and critical.

- **Encourage discussion and interaction** by drawing attention to interesting points or questions raised by other students, suggesting positive courses of action, providing links to interesting articles or other material, or posing questions or topics for discussion. Engage regularly to demonstrate your availability and interest in what is happening in your community.

- **Use open-ended questions to stimulate responses**, as closed-option questions elicit answers that shut down discussion. Ask learners for examples from their own experience, invite different responses and encourage learners to discuss the different views expressed by their peers.

Here is an example of a good question:

"*Now you know more about them, which social, cultural and personal factors most influence your consumer habits? And can you think of an example where a company has used these to encourage a purchase you've made? Share your experiences with your fellow students on the forum.*"

- **Summarise discussions or draw out key themes** to consolidate or build understanding (students or educators can do this).

- **Use small-group work to support learning.** Set up smaller groups within the cohort to do an activity together. This could involve researching a topic, solving a problem or writing about a case study as a group. Individuals can be asked to play different roles in a scenario and report to others in the group. Small groups can engage in research or share their knowledge with others in the community by blogging or creating a wiki. Small groups can be created using breakout rooms in webinar software or by providing their own discussion forum or wiki.

KEY TERMS

VLE (virtual learning environment): an online platform for providing support for learning and teaching. The VLE can be used to host blended or online learning. Generally, a VLE will enable the hosting of documents and media, provision of communication channels, assignments, grades and feedback, amongst other tools.

Wiki: a website where content is created, deleted and edited collaboratively by many users.

Blog: abbreviation of 'weblog'. Blogs usually contain comments and opinions written in an informal, journaling style, with posts usually appearing in reverse chronological order i.e. latest first. Blogs can be run by one person or a small group.

Forum: an online discussion group where participants with common interests can hold conversations by posting open messages.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Learners learn more and develop deeper understanding when they interact with peers and educators.
2. An online community should be learner-centred, providing a safe space for active learning for all learners.
3. Be yourself, and project your personality and enthusiasm for your subject as this helps build connections.
4. Establish the educator's presence with welcome messages and well-judged contributions but leave space for learners to respond to each other.
5. Roles between educators and learners can be flexible or interchangeable at different times e.g. initiating, facilitating or moderating discussions or activities.
6. Open-ended questions prompt good responses and good debate.
7. A strong online community supports, encourages, shares resources and builds knowledge and understanding.

FURTHER READING

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