



7 Steps to: Creating online learning communities

Overview

The term 'learning community' has various interpretations framed by shifting contexts, but defined by four key features: relationships, access, vision and function (West and Williams, 2017). In essence a learning community can be described as a group of people who learn together, with each other and from each other, and in collaboration. The scale of such learning communities, their vision and function, and whether they are open or selective, is likely to differ according to the nature of the programme. In the age of digital education and online learning environments the way in which learning communities are formed, nurtured and sustained needs to be carefully considered. In the physical classroom some of the community building and socialisation would occur even before the lecturer entered the room. In the online environment opportunities for conversation need to be created and facilitated.

The notion of the learning community is founded on the principles of social constructionism whereby students develop their knowledge and understanding through discussion, exploration, critique, argument, and debate with their peers (Burr, 2005). Whether the learning takes place on campus or online, research demonstrates that becoming a member of a learning community is central to the formation of student identity (Wenger, 2000) and academic success (Ryle and Cumming, 2007). A sense of belonging created through socialisation within a learning community is also essential to student retention (Tinto, 2000). For these reasons ways in which academics can develop and support learning communities within their programmes, modules and placements must be at the heart of online programme design.

This 7 steps article will suggest several practical strategies you can use to create, nurture and sustain learning communities in the digital learning environment.

1. Invite students in and model appropriate language

Contrary to popular opinion the notion of the 'digital native' (Prensky 2001), a student who can navigate around and engage with digital learning platforms unassisted, is misplaced (Kirschner and Bruyckere, 2017). First, this notion is only attributed to students born since the 1990s and does not account for the significant number of mature students in Higher Education. Second, it fails to acknowledge that whilst levels of interaction with social media may be high, the range of technologies that people engage with is quite limited (ibid). Therefore, do not assume students will find their own way to your online resources and their learning community, instead send them a direct invite and a link to take them to their digital learning space and the first introductory activity. Online communication has altered the level of formality/informality we use in digital contexts (Sabater, 2008). Demonstrate the desired tone through your own use of language as you communicate with students.

2. Design activities that stimulate interaction

Laurillard (2002) outlines 6 ways in which learning takes place: acquisition, inquiry/investigation, discussion, practice, collaboration, and production. Each of these need to be an integral part of your programme or module. However, discussion and collaboration are most central to forming and developing learning communities. Use discussion and collaboration particularly in synchronous learning activities to underpin other types of learning. For example, if you have set some pre-reading or asked students to watch some vodcasts, use the synchronous session for students to work in small groups to answer some questions relating to their preparatory work. Design activities whereby student groups are asked to collectively produce something such as: an explanatory diagram, a short presentation, results and findings, a performance, or slides on a sub-topic. Such activities require interaction and encourage students to work together synchronously and asynchronously to make their contributions. They also draw students into small learning communities and provide a purpose and focus for their interactions (West and Williams, 2017).

3. Start with low-risk, non-threatening activities

Some self-confessed 'technophobe' students may perceive the online learning environment as a considerable challenge (Fee, 2009). Academics also need to consider the quieter more introverted students (Condon and Ruth-Sahd, 2013) and ways in which such students can be encouraged to participate. *'Adaptive behavior requires an ability to make advantageous decisions by predicting the likelihood of future success based upon previous experience'* (Critchley et al, 2001:537). For this reason, start with 'low-risk' activities which enable students to contribute without the fear of getting a 'wrong' answer. This will build confidence and encourage them to engage in future activities. Low-risk activities might invite students to collectively: solve a problem; design something; respond to visual images or a piece of music; draw and annotate a cartoon, for example, of a prize-winning scientist/musician/archaeologist. You could ask students to share information such as their favourite food or professional ambitions. Or you could play subject specific games designed to encourage interaction and develop awareness of your discipline, or simple [generic ice-breaker games](#) such as 2 truths 1 lie!

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4. Have a visible presence

Rourke (1999) suggests that in the online environment academics should create 'social, teacher and cognitive presence'. Cognitive tasks and resources draw students into the subject, stimulate dialogue between the 'teacher' and student and encourage peer learning. Communication tools within the digital environment such as wikis, discussion boards, FAQs, webinars, and break-out rooms are used to create social presence. Teachers should nurture the online learning community by showing an active presence within each of these spaces. This lets the students know you are 'there' and encourages them to interact with you and their peers in the digital learning environment. The presence of the academic is as valuable to the students as the content of the programme. This may require a re-balancing of your academic role with greater emphasis on facilitation of and interaction with the learning community.

5. Concentrate on continuity, collaboration and progression

Good curriculum design ensures that every activity and every resource is directly relevant to the Learning Outcomes (LOs) and assessment of the module. This is referred to as constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2007). Make sure that students can see how each activity will help them develop their knowledge and understanding, and incrementally prepare them for the assessment activity. This transparency will encourage students to engage with the learning activities and each other, thereby strengthening their sense of community, and the collaborative approach required to achieve their mutual goals.

6. Create an uncluttered learning environment

Communities rarely 'happen' unassisted. Even self-determined and democratic communities require organisation (Decker, 1990) and need to be accessible. This has implications for the online environment in which your learning communities will operate. The digital learning platform must be accessible and uncluttered. Avoid too much text on the landing pages, as scanning rather than deep reading is the norm in the digital age (Liu, 2005). Minimise the volume of information, use key words, and insert clearly labelled links to more detailed information or resources. Simplify navigation around programme and module sites. This will prevent frustration and abandonment and instead enable learners to focus on the activities and peer-to-peer learning.

7. Be strategic and be human

Plan the type of activities you will use at specific points across the programme schedule. Consider the demands on students and design activities to support their needs and draw them back in to the learning community at appropriate moments across the academic calendar. For example, at the start of the year you may stimulate discussion using discussion boards; mid-module you may increase the use of small-group online tutorials; as students work towards exams you may run live revision webinars. Wherever possible be strategic. Make your teacher presence (Rourke, 1999) visible in the public spaces of the digital learning environment. You can do this by collating common student questions and answering them in the FAQs section, or delivering a 4 minute vodcast giving generic formative feedback and tips for the module assessment. This will enable all your students to access the same information, demonstrate that you are both present in the learning space and responsive, and cut down the volume of direct email enquiries. Draw students together in peer learning in synchronous and asynchronous activities throughout the year to remind them that they are part of a present (rather than remote) learning community. Notice if a student drops off the radar and get in touch to see how they are doing and direct them towards relevant support such as [Student Learning](#), [Student Wellbeing](#) or the [Student's Union](#).

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