

BUILDING ONLINE COMMUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

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Introduction

Online communities can be an excellent means for educational professionals to maintain currency of knowledge, access the expertise of peers and share resources.

This paper will explore some of the issues to be addressed when building an online community as a professional support and development network. It will also suggest some strategies for facilitation and support of online communities. The author will draw on her extensive experience in establishing and developing the VECO community as well as involvement in the projects of the Australian Council for Computers in Education (ACCE) and the Tasmanian Society for Information Technology in Education (TASITE). VECO is Vocational Education Community Online – a network for practitioners of VET in Schools that operated from 1997-2001 and has now been reinvented as e-vocation, one of the Enterprise & Career Education Foundation's (ECEP) e-communities.

Developing and nurturing an online community

IT IS WIDELY accepted in the literature and through case studies (ANTA, 1998) that the success factors for an online network include a shared well defined purpose and the need for facilitation. Much of the literature about online facilitation and development of online communities is set in the context of effective online teaching and learning.

Whilst the principles are the same, there are some different considerations when developing an online community as a network for professionals. Such networks tend to have an ongoing intake of new members rather than a fixed cohort of students undertaking a course in the teaching and learning situation. Thus there may be limited opportunity to nurture the group through an establishment phase as recommended by writers such as Gilly Salmon (Salmon, 2000). Different strategies need to be used to make newcomers feel at home and become familiar with the established and evolving culture of the group. In the VECO example, this was achieved through the automatically generated welcome message to new members and the periodic issue of an e-newsletter, VECO Roundup. The model underpinning VECO is described elsewhere (Bowes and Williams, 2000).

Research (Willet, 1999) and subsequent informal surveys confirmed that the VECO community was effective. It was characterised by a manageable amount of regular (messages posted) and a diversity of activity including a range of communication modes; a mixture of ad hoc and structured activities; provision of some services; and ongoing monitoring, facilitation and support.

There is no one size fits all situation approach for developing online communities. Some core principles apply and an online community developer/facilitator needs a range of skills and understanding of the available technologies, their pros and cons, as well as interpersonal skills.

After that, a lot of intuition and improvisation is required on a regular basis (such as also the stuff of good teaching practice) as well as forethought and planning for structured events if used.

Communication is the core-choice of technology

Communities are about people and their interactions with each other. Thus communication is the heart of online communities. The choice of technology to be used as the primary communication vehicle for an online community is very important. The choice should be informed by geographic location, access to technology and any known preferences of the group.

At its simplest level, an effective online community can be developed through the medium of an email discussion list. Most listervers also provide web-based archives of discussion enabling the automatic preservation of the history of the group. Listerver services are readily available free of charge to the education community through EdNA online, some State and Territory systems or commercial providers.

The more sophisticated environments do not necessarily produce the best online communities. The success of an online community depends on many inter-related factors; some of which are technology based and many others that relate to human behaviour.

It is difficult to go past email as the ideal core communication tool for an online community. It is fast, reliable, inexpen-

sive, uses little bandwidth, is universally available and does not require a sophisticated level of hardware or software. Further, where online costs are an issue, it is possible to write and reply to email messages offline. Email is also “push” technology, being delivered to the user without conscious action thus more closely emulates the conversational flow of a community than alternative web based technologies. An email discussion list can be an excellent choice of core software for an online community of geographically diverse potential members.

Whilst email discussion lists are excellent online community tools, handling large volumes of email is an increasing challenge for most workers in the emerging knowledge economy. An active email discussion list may generate significant volumes of mail on a daily basis and this is not necessarily a welcome feature.

As technologies converge, some communication tools enable the user to choose their mode of participation – via email or web. Indeed a well-informed group member may change their mode of participation according to their situation at a given time.

Online community websites as knowledge management tools

The website for an online community serves several purposes:

- Provision of information about the community and how to participate;
- Hosting of the tools of communication and conferencing; and
- Knowledge management for the community by providing ways to organise relevant information contributed by the community (eg resource collections, databases) and record the history of the community.

Having established successful communications, most online communities have a need to store and organise their knowledge base. The specific needs depend on the purpose and size of the group and whether it is a public or private network.

For example a professional association committee may need to store material such as minutes of meetings, documents

relating to professional development events, utilise a group calendar and maintain contact information. A free tool such as Yahoo Groups provides a listserver function with web based archives, a document store with the capacity to create folders and sub folders, a group calendar, a group polling tool, contact database and other customisable features. This is a very effective knowledge management system for many groups where interaction and execution of specific tasks rather than marketing is the purpose of the online activity. TASITE uses Yahoo groups in two different ways: with all features as an online office for its committee and as a listserver for a state based email discussion group. The discussion group is also archived by EdNA online so that there is searchable public access to it. With the advent of free tools such as Yahoo groups (formerly e-groups) and the services offered by EdNA online, it is feasible for volunteer organisations to have robust systems in place with no technical expertise or cost. Note that this does not replace the need for a website.

ACCE has utilised online communities in its core work and in projects. Through the NATCOM projects during 1997-1999 ACCE assisted the peak national KLA professional associations in the use of online technologies to enhance their operations. An online community was formed to support the project and used to develop knowledge and skills as well as enable participation in activities. Many synergies and collaborations resulted within and between the groups as a result of this approach.

For its own operations ACCE has developed a number of customised online tools on its website that act as back end support to the ACCE Board. For the management and sharing of documents, contact information and meeting management as well as a web publishing capability to enable the web-based maintenance of some pages within the site.

In recent years, the increasing ease of producing database driven websites has enabled rapid web publishing and significantly reduced the workload and skills required for website maintenance. When

such websites are used for online communities, the members can be empowered to be writers as well as readers of the website.

Selecting strategies for online activity according to the needs of the group and available resources

There is a range of strategies that can be used to encourage online participation. For a given network, the mix of strategies appropriate for their needs will depend on the goals of the group and the availability of resources both technical and human. Specific strategies can foster particular types of thinking and problem solving.

Ad Hoc versus Structured online activity

A fundamental decision for any online network is whether it is used for ad hoc information and discussion some degree of structured activity.

In developing the VECO community, the goal was to achieve a balance between the two, providing communication, information services and professional development. In its early stages, seeding of discussion and daily activity depended heavily on the facilitator. Gradually, through formal and informal training, leading by example, and reflective practice online, this role was shared by various members of the community. When the community went through some relatively “quiet” times, the facilitator stimulated activity through a mix of strategies. Activity generates activity! Monitoring of activity and taking corrective action when needed became aspects of the ongoing facilitation of this community.

Once an online community is established, and has attained a critical mass – typically around 100 members, a side effect is that structured online activities can occur without the need to establish the group dynamics. It takes time and energy to develop an online community to a point where meaningful discussion and knowledge construction can take place so an established community is a great asset. Examples of structured activities are facilitated discussion on a set topic, online guest events (Williams, 2000) and email games (Jasinski, 2000). Structured activities provide focus, an

avenue for outside expertise to be accessed, and potentially a knowledge construction environment. Participants benefit directly from both the content and the process. The outcomes and/or archive of proceedings may also be an ongoing resource for the community in the form of new online content specific to the context of the particular community.

Online guest events – an example of structured activity

Online guest events are an excellent way to bring outside expertise to a community. In the VECO project, a range of online guest models were developed and research (Willett, 1999) showed that these events were highly valued by the community who saw them as adding value and quality to the online experience. The models evolved from a simple email only model with members acting as guests to a much more sophisticated month long mini conference with multiple guests (not necessarily members) and extensive use of the website before, during and after the event. In between these two extremes were variations - panels of guests, hybrid events where face to face events were webcast to a known remote audience with chat afterwards, and events that involved multiple activities. The VECO website includes archival records of these events and the models have been documented in writing elsewhere (Bowes, 1998a, Bowes 1998b, and Williams, 2000).

It is useful to look at the planning, execution and post event production of an event in some detail from a “behind the scenes” perspective. There are lessons to be learned from understanding the reasons for technical and process decisions and analysing the subsequent results. Space does not allow detailed analysis in this paper but suffice it to say that the planning and execution of an online event is likely to include the following aspects:

Before the event:

- Designing the event – focus questions; activities;
- Contacting potential guests and briefing them on the event and the context;
- Preparation of guests – providing appropriate orientation and scaffolding for working in the online environment;

- Development of a support website and customisation of communication tools if required – includes biographical information, information about the event, how to participate, background material, links to discussion archives; and
- Advertising and promotion through existing network and beyond as appropriate.

During the event:

- Facilitation including orientation messages, introduction of guests, regular posting of summaries synthesising threads of discussion and guiding direction if appropriate, providing support for guests and audience and closing the event.

After the event:

- Postproduction tasks – feedback survey, selected summary material and resources added to website and closure on communication devices as required.

It is self evident that running online events is a non-trivial task requiring time and expertise. An online community needs adequate human resourcing whether on a

voluntary or paid basis in order to make use of the opportunities afforded by such events.

Monitoring the health of an online community

How can we tell whether an online community is going well? This can be very difficult to measure in concrete terms. A set of statistics was used to monitor the online activity of the VECO community on a monthly basis. The table below summarises the data collected from the archives and how it was interpreted.

Combining these data with website statistics was also informative particularly when there were correlations between increased web activity and particular facilitation strategies.

Whilst the figures for any given month were interesting, the trends over several months were most useful for determining what changes to make to facilitation strategies. It is not the intention of the author to claim a deep scientific basis to this data collection and analysis but rather to illustrate an attempt to base decisions about a non-concrete process on some concrete data.

Data collected	Indicators of “good health”
List membership at end of month	Increase or stability depending on stage of community development (new or mature)
Number of new members during the month	A steady or increasing number of new members indicates good health
Number of members left (and reasons if known – members were automatically sent an email if they unsubscribed, asking for reasons)	Generally lower than the new members and for reasons of natural attrition rather than dissatisfaction
Number of messages posted	More is not necessarily better! Over time an optimum level of traffic became apparent. This would not necessarily be the same for all communities. Some people become intolerant of too much traffic
Number of individuals posting messages (raw number and as percentage of membership)	Ideally there will be contributions from a range of people
Number of individuals posting 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or more messages	Multiple postings may indicate ongoing active engagement (desirable) but too may indicated an overly dominant member.
Number of messages posted by list facilitator (raw number and as percentage of total number of messages)	The facilitator ought not to be overly dominant. However, there may be a level of direct stimulus needed to sustain quality activity.
Deepest thread – topic and number of messages	Generally, the deeper the thread, the higher the quality of debate and engagement
Most popular topics	This often informed the choice of structured activities as a response to self identified needs
Top 10 posters	Ideally not always the same 10 people!

Figures don't tell the whole story – beneath the tip of the iceberg

Whilst this data provided useful information, much anecdotal information was also collected incidentally which suggested that there was a lot more activity taking place than what was happening in the public domain. When formal independent research (Willet, 1998) was conducted about the VECO project, those surveyed were asked to self identify as active contributors, active lurkers (ie respond privately to messages posted and/or pass information on to others) or passive lurkers (those who read but never participate). The results indicated that 20% were active participants, 45% active lurkers and 34% passive lurkers. Thus the private activity by active lurkers is significant.

Other online communities have explored the issue of "Do lurkers learn?" (LearnScope, 1999) and have come to the conclusion that lurking is a valid means of learning for some people, in some situations. Further, an individual may choose to be a lurker in one community and an active participant in another depending on their level of expertise, interest, and engagement at the time.

The good news for an online community is that what is observed in the public domain is probably only the tip of the iceberg but on the other hand, it is important that there is a tip of the iceberg. Lurking is fine as long as everyone is not lurking at once! There needs to be sufficient public interaction or there is no stimulus for discussion, debate or learning. It may not always be the same set of people providing the tip of the iceberg activity and part of the rich fabric of an effective community is that most people have a sense of give and take and "doing their share". In reality, most people initially come to an online community for what they can get out of it and the desire and indeed courage to contribute may take time to develop. A supportive online environment ensures contributions are valued and a culture of give and take is embedded.

Concluding comments

Remembering that the medium is not the message, professional communities can benefit from the complementary use of face to face events, print publications and online activity. One can be used to promote and highlight the other and tech-

nology can enable alternative modes of participation in face to face events.

An emerging issue is the increasing number of online opportunities competing for educators' time. Developing an effective online community of interest takes considerable time, energy and resources. The ongoing benefit is an asset of human capital the value of which is sometimes underestimated. Opportunities for collaboration and synergy exist and it makes sense to explore these in the context of educators' limited capacity to participate in multiple communities.

Biography

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Janine is an educator with 24 years experience in teaching and more recently online learning and professional development. Her current role is Project Director for the *National Quality Teacher Information Exchange Project*, a Commonwealth government project. She is currently President of the Tasmanian Society for Information Technology in Education and Secretary of the Australian Council for Computers in Education.

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