Top Tips for Building Online Communities

Getting started

Establish its purpose ▶

Is it a social space? A way to gain support on academic work? The purpose of your community space should be the central driver behind all the other decisions that you make.

Think about your platform ▶

Are there key things you want to achieve in your community that are better suited to particular online platforms? You may also want to consider student and staff existing familiarity with a platform. Sometimes you may find that people will be more likely to engage with an initiative if it is hosted on a platform with which they are already familiar.

Set up a pilot area ▶

If you're creating an online community on a platform that's less familiar to participants, you may want to set up a pilot area and undertake user research/testing before launching your community to a larger group.

Structuring your online space ▶

Although some spaces work well when attendees can chat without too much formal instruction, you may want to provide activities or prompts to get people interacting, particularly when establishing a new community.

Consider community size ▶

Too small, and you may find getting discussion or activities going more challenging, but too large, and the group may become unwieldy and hard to manage. The optimum size of the group will, of course, depend on the purpose of your community and what you would like attendees to get out of it. If your community does get too large, you may want to consider setting up breakout groups in a video platform, or multiple discussion threads in a written space, to ensure that everyone has a chance to get involved.

Joining from across the globe ▶

When designing your online community, consider whether attendees are likely to be joining from different time zones. If so, select the platform with this in mind. Perhaps you could establish smaller groups within your larger community, based on time zone, so that attendees get a chance to see others 'live'. You can also include a discussion board format, so that contributors can interact non–concurrently.

Is it accessible and inclusive? ▶

When designing or selecting your platform, you should endeavour to create a community that is accessible and inclusive. Depending on the format of the space and the needs of participants, this may include live captioning, an interface that uses fonts and colours most suited to those with specific learning differences, British Sign Language interpreters, and a platform that works for attendees joining on a diverse range of devices – for example, laptop, tablet or mobile phone. Where possible, you should design community spaces using the principles of universal design, so that it can be accessible to as many people as possible from the offset.

Supporting participants

Set expectations for the space ▶

Are there particular behaviours or actions that you want to encourage or discourage? It is important to make any requirements and 'netiquette' clear from the beginning.

Anonymous contributions ▶

Consider whether your community space will allow anonymous contributions or not. Generally, institutions want visitors to their online spaces to be identifiable. Some benefits to this approach are that it can allow for greater connection and familiarity between attendees and that attendees may be more likely to behave appropriately when they aren't anonymous. Nevertheless, there may be some online community spaces which may benefit from allowing anonymity – for example, where students may want to ask questions on academic topics but feel reluctant to do so with their names attached.

Working together ▶

Staff should work in partnership with students to establish online communities. Students are experts in their own learning and will be able to give a first-hand perspective on what they want and need from an online community.

Managing contributions ▶

If it's a discussion board, this may be simpler, but if your online community is on a video platform such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom, then be explicit about how you want people to interact. Do you want attendees to 'raise their hand' on the platform, or is it a more informal setting where they should just unmute their mic? Would you like to encourage use of the chat box, or do you want to discourage separate conversations taking place while others are speaking?.

Camera protocol ▶

Some staff and students have expressed concerns around the challenges of establishing an online community when attendees keep their cameras switched off. There are several potential solutions to this issue. One is to raise the issue with the group at the beginning and provide a clear rationale as to the benefits of having your camera switched on. Another alternative may be to have activities in smaller groups, where participants feel more comfortable switching on their camera. It is also important to keep in mind the many valid reasons why students may choose to keep their cameras switched off. Is it workable for attendees to participate through the chat box or by annotating slides instead? Ultimately, the most successful communities are those where attendees feel comfortable.

Welcome the unexpected ▶

Recognise that people may have unexpected interruptions at home and acknowledge this in the community setting from the beginning. Be it the unplanned appearance of children, parents or pets, a delivery arriving, or building work next door – if you reassure attendees that these are expected (and in some cases even encouraged!), then it will put the group at ease.

Think beyond online ▶

Online communities can involve in-person activities as well. For example, you could post the same book to all attendees to read in advance, which they can then discuss online. Or you could set people an offline challenge, such as taking a photograph of their local surroundings, which can then be shared with the online community.

Managing disruptive behaviour ▶

In the (hopefully unlikely) event that someone is being disruptive in the online community, ensure that you have a procedure for handling these types of issues. Depending on the type of disruption, sometimes the attendee can be added to a breakout room and a warning given about their behaviour. For more serious situations, it may be appropriate to remove someone entirely from the community space. In discussion boards, regular moderation is important and posts that do not meet community guidelines should be dealt with following the policies and procedures you have set in place.

Returning to campus ▶

Some community spaces may return to in-person settings as students return to campus. If this risks any students being left out, such as international students who are still unable to get back to the UK, consider if you can set up a hybrid space where individuals can choose to join either in-person or online. This also allows flexibility for the community in the event of anyone having to self-isolate at short notice. If you do set up a hybrid space, remember to find ways to include those joining in virtually.

Seek feedback regularly ▶

Give opportunities for students to feed back on the community space regularly and suggest improvements and additions.

Find out more

The project in year 1 explored issues and themes relevant to how higher education institutions and students' associations/unions have recreated student communities in an online environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, what enablers and barriers this has created, and provides the opportunity to showcase and share examples of practice.

You can find further case studies and resources on the Enhancement Themes website.

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