Information Management Resource Kit

Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks

UNIT 5. ONLINE FACILITATION

LESSON 3. DEVELOPING YOUR ONLINE COMMUNITY CULTURE

NOTE

Please note that this PDF version does not have the interactive features offered through the IMARK courseware such as exercises with feedback, pop-ups, animations etc.

We recommend that you take the lesson using the interactive courseware environment, and use the PDF version for printing the lesson and to use as a reference after you have completed the course.

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

• identify factors influencing the development of online community cultures; and

• identify activities to enhance online community culture.

Introduction

For an online group to be a "community" it needs to be more than a collection of individuals who have subscribed to a mailing list.

Just as putting fifty people in a room together doesn't make them a community, subscribing them to a list, blog or online interaction space doesn't make them an online community.

Community is about the **nature and quality of relationships and communication**, and about **shared visions and commitment**.

Online community culture
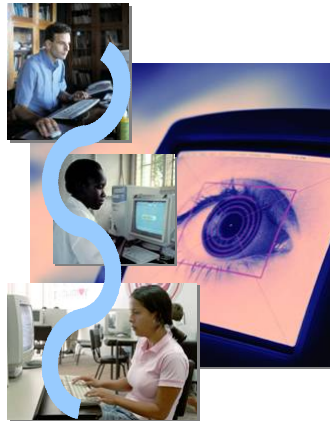
Online communities develop their own **unique cultures**, which evolve over the course of shared activities, especially online discussions.

Things like...

• the level of group posting activity
• the formality/informality of message tone
• if and how humour is used
• the balance between social and task-focused interaction
• the nature and extent of facilitation

... all combine to shape the culture of the online community.

Online community culture

COMMUNITY CULTURE

A broad definition of community/group culture is:

The collective beliefs, knowledge, traditions, habits and values that characterize a community or group and regulate the way members interact with each other.

Here are some characteristics of culture:

• **Culture evolves**: culture is an accumulation of beliefs, traditions etc. which develop over time, sometimes over thousands of years, sometimes over a shorter period. We can't "plan" or "legislate" a culture into existence: it develops and changes over time.

• **Culture is learned**, not something we are born with. Some elements of culture may be formally taught, some elements we learn through observation.

• **Cultural practices can be positive or negative**. For example, we can speak of a "supportive" organizational culture (evident where "supportiveness" is both valued and practiced), or say that "corruption was embedded in the organizational culture").

Just as "community" can apply to different types and sizes of groups so "culture" can be applied to groups as diverse as religious groups, corporations, and online communities.

Previous relationships

One of the most significant factors influencing the development of online community culture is **previous relationships**.

If some or all members already know each other from face-to-face interaction (or other online communities) existing relationships will carry over onto the list and affect the group dynamic.

In your opinion, do these relationships always influence the community culture positively?

○ Yes
○ No

Please click on the answer of your choice

Previous relationships

Imagine that some (not all) online community members have worked together for many years.

They know each other already and relationships are good.

How could this affect the online community culture?

○ Negatively

○ Positively

○ Both positively and negatively

Please click on the answer of your choice

Online interactions

Online discussions are another significant factor influencing the culture of an online community.

The manner in which discussions are facilitated or moderated, the extent to which people feel free to express themselves, the quality of the discussion and management of information flows, the sensitivity to differences such as gender, language and access, and how this is managed, all contribute to shaping the culture of the online community.

Think of this as a cycle: the habits and patterns of communication influence the culture of the group, which in turn influences future interaction...

habits and patterns of communication

→

culture of the group

→

future interaction
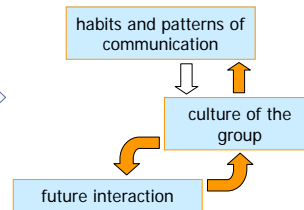
In online groups, **the way a group communicates from the start sets the tone for what follows**.

Effective facilitation is a significant enabler of effective communication.

Attending to the foundation

How to develop a sense of community and enhance community culture?

The first step is to **attend to the foundations** of the online community.

As an online facilitator, you first need to ensure that participants understand, share and are committed to **community goals** and **guidelines**.

Let's have a look at these important issues...

Ongoing use of goals and objectives
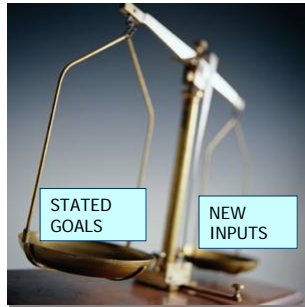
During the analysis and design stage of the community building process, goals and objectives have been stated together with the stakeholders.

However, you should present a formal version of goals and objectives to the community for discussion.

If necessary, you should revise them based on input from the community, and present the final version for community approval.

Even if community members have agreed to the group goals it may still be necessary to **balance different needs and goals**.

Balancing competing interests

Community members are individuals and also members of other communities (organizations, cultures, families) with their own individual goals and needs, which may affect interaction.

Community members may want to revise the project goals **as more urgent issues arise** – while your donors might require you to follow the original goals and objectives very closely.

Some community members may have a greater interest in certain aspects of the project than in others.

Balance competing interests by...

• Involving community members in goal setting, and ensuring that members are familiar with the community's goals and ground rules;
• Reminding members of the goals they have agreed to;
• Being as flexible as your circumstances allow: if it becomes clear that your goals are not practical, or that there are more pressing needs, consider revising them. Listen to the group and ensure that there is consensus before goals and objectives are changed.

Ongoing use of goals and objectives

Goals should not be developed and left to gather dust.

GOALS

You will need to...
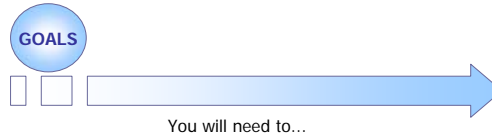
Communicate the community's goals and objectives to people who join it after the initial goal-setting process so that they know what they are committing themselves to. Include information about the community's goals and objectives in the online information file which is automatically sent to people who subscribe to your online workspaces. If the community has a web page, ensure that the goals are included in the text.

Remind all community members of the shared goals and objectives from time to time, and "check in" on progress.

Ongoing use of goals and objectives

Keeping the discussions relevant to the community's goals and objectives

In order to ensure that discussions are kept relevant to the community's original goals and objectives it is necessary to regularly revisit them.

Refer to your goals and objectives at key stages in the discussion: at the start to make sure all participants know what they are aiming for within the community, and at the end so that the community can evaluate its progress towards those goals and objectives.

Remind participants of the goals and objectives from time to time, especially if you feel the discussions are becoming irrelevant to the main purpose of the community. This should be done sensitively as you do not want to upset the sense of community.

Reassess the goals and objectives to ensure that they remain relevant to your community. It may be that your community achieves its objectives but that it then faces new challenges.

Ongoing use of goals and objectives

Imagine you are facilitating an online community that has been set up to campaign against the use of a particular pesticide.

After some time, it seems that the community is reaching its goal as the government indicates its intent to ban the pesticide. In the course of the campaign, some members start to talk about other harmful chemicals being used in the country.

How would you ensure consistency between goal and discussions?

○ Reminding participants of the original goal to not upset the sense of the community.

○ Reassessing the original goal in order to include wider objectives.

Please click on the answer of your choice

Ongoing use of goals and objectives

Information and communication needs analysis is an important tool that a facilitator can use to get input from the community and ensure that key needs are being assessed and addressed by the online community.

As a facilitator, you may or may not be involved in the comprehensive information needs analysis for the project. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility to:

Be aware of community information and communication needs throughout the life of the community

• Keep an eye on community information seeking behaviour - the types of information members are asking for and exchanging.

• Ask community members directly what their needs are: use e-mail mini-surveys or Web site polls to ask what types of information they would like posted to community spaces. Polls can be an easy way for facilitators to check group opinions about priorities and policy viewpoints.

Be aware of whether the needs are being met – and if not, try to find ways of meeting them

• When requests for information are posted to community spaces, check whether other community members respond to them. If not, try to find someone who can answer: you, a colleague, another community member.

• If you are aware of categories of information needs which are not being met (for example, community members ask for regular updates on job vacancies or funding opportunities), try to address this systematically by gathering and disseminating relevant information.

Setting guidelines

We said that a good start increases the likelihood of good ongoing community interaction. Another thing to do from the beginning is to provide a set of **guidelines** that set the tone of the interaction of all community members (including the facilitator) and establish boundaries for interaction.

Guidelines should:

• define acceptable behaviour – what may be communicated, and how;

• help groups avoid misunderstanding and causing offence;

• provide a point of reference when postings need to be removed or edited;

• ensure member safety and encourage open communication and participation; and

• provide a consistent guide for moderation, facilitation and membership.

Developing guidelines for your online community

Guidelines and rules should be as clear and as simple as possible, and should be relevant to the nature and purpose of your group.

The following table represents steps to be followed in developing guidelines:

Action	Description
1) Research and draft	First look at examples from other similar communities. Some of the rules may be relevant to your community, others not. Start to build a list of the rules that you feel will be most appropriate.
2) Consult	Check with your community members how they want the list to run and which rules they want to use. Some may have previous experience on other lists or forums that may give them insights that will help you. Also ask other people you know who may have relevant experience or contact experts for advice if necessary.
3) Ask for explicit agreement	Ask people to explicitly agree to the guidelines. This may mean a having a short discussion at the outset, having a topic always open in a web discussion, etc. The way is not important, you can do it in any way that suits the group.
4) Revise	The guidelines may need to be revised from time to time. As your community progresses and new situations arise and are dealt with you may want to develop new rules or change existing ones. For example, if there is a problem with a particular participant posting offensive comments about others and it is decided to remove them from the list, the community may want to include a rule that explains that this type of behaviour will not be tolerated and that people breaking the rule will be given one warning and will be removed from the list if they re-offend.

Technological changes – for example, moving over to new listserver software – may also make it necessary for you to change some of your posting guidelines.

Setting guidelines

Guidelines should cover general principles of online interaction (often called **netiquette**, short for "net etiquette") as well as rules specific to your online community. Posting guidelines should **contain the following elements**:

Guidelines on general netiquette
General netiquette guidelines usually cover interpersonal aspects of interaction, as well as more technical ones. Common guidelines are:
• Be polite and respectful to other participants;
• Use meaningful subject headings, and keep posts relevant to the subject heading they are posted under. Avoid excessively long subject headings;
• Keep messages short and to the point;
• When replying to messages, don't include the full text of the original message. Edit it so that only the essentials are included in your message;
• Decide when you want to reply to the whole group or send a private message.

Group-specific guidelines
As with general netiquette guidelines, group-specific guidelines should cover both interpersonal and technical aspects. Formulate guidelines concerning:
• Interaction issues relating to your specific community. For example, in a multilingual/multicultural group, include guidelines about respecting each others' cultures and about the community language policy;
• The scope of topics permitted;
• Whether advertising is permitted;
• Technical issues such as whether attachments are permitted (and if so, if there is a size limit), and whether HTML-encoded messages are permitted;
• Privacy/confidentiality: whether community members may circulate postings outside the group, along with any legal issues relating to the country where the list is hosted.
You also should ask the group for explicit agreement on the guidelines. This may mean having a short discussion at the outset, having a topic always open in a web discussion, etc.

What happens if the rules are broken
Your ground rules should set out what happens if the rules are broken. Possible actions include:
• In a moderated list or forum, rejecting postings which fail to respect the guidelines;
• On a web bulletin board, removing inappropriate postings;
• Removing offenders from the online space, permanently or for a specified period;
• Discussing controversial postings with an advisory group.

Setting guidelines

As an online facilitator, you should **communicate the guidelines** by developing an **information file** for your online community.

The information file will include:

• information about the community, such as the goals and target audience;
• community guidelines; and
• how to contact you or get help in using the online space.

Ensure that the information file is sent to all new community members (you may send it out automatically to new subscribers), and post it to the list from time to time as a reminder to existing members.

See interactive lesson to view and print an example of guidelines posted in a group of online moderators.

Previous relationships

Once you have attended to the foundations of the online community, you should try to **enhance online communication culture**.

This takes time and consistent effort to develop, and there are several ways to do it. One of these relates to previous relationships.

Using previous relationships

Imagine that some members know each other already and have very good relationships.

Often, they refer to interesting events that not all participants are familiar with. This discourages other members to participate.

What would you do if you were the facilitator?

○ Ask them to provide more background.
○ Ask them to not talk about these events.

Please click on the answer of your choice

Community identity and ownership

Promoting group ownership

Another way to enhance online communication culture is promoting community identity and ownership.

"Ownership" means that people in the group feel responsibility for the group, and feel that they are able to influence directions and activities.

Communities in which members identify strongly with the group tend to be stronger and more effective, as are communities with a strong sense of group ownership.

Community identity and ownership

Using face-to-face opportunities

Trust can and does emerge in online communities, and online communities can develop strong bonds and a shared culture without face-to-face interaction.

However, supplementing online interaction with face-to-face interaction almost always strengthens and deepens a sense of community.

If you can **combine face-to-face and online interaction** you have the potential to build a community which is stronger and more connected than one which relies on either form exclusively.

Combining face-to-face and online interaction: an example

A number of development communication trainers see each other once or twice a year at conferences and workshops. They are not a "community", but they would like the opportunity to share information more regularly.

They set up an online space which allows them to communicate easily and regularly. They already know each other (which makes them comfortable in their online communications), they have a shared interest and purpose, and are now interacting regularly.

Combining face-to-face and online interaction has turned them into an effective community! Their occasional meetings at face-to-face event renew their enthusiasm for and commitment to the community.

Community identity and ownership

How to use face-to-face opportunities?

Make the best of existing opportunities

Encourage community members to share information about events they will be attending and to set up informal or formal meetings after hours or during breaks at these events. Post this information to online spaces and the community calendar.

Organize your own face-to-face events

These can be events for the community as a whole, or for sub-groups such as members within the same region.

Feedback from face-to-face events

Ask those attending face-to-face events to post regular summaries to the community's online spaces, and to upload photographs to the community Web site.

Community identity and ownership

Using rituals and celebrations

Ritual and celebrations can be used to develop a sense of community online.

Use your online space to **mark important community landmarks** such as community anniversaries or important accomplishments.

Develop your own "rituals" - habitual ways of encouraging the community to feel "at home" online - regular and reliable points to check-in around such as weekly updates, or more personal customs such as mentioning birthdays or family news for people to respond to. Let these habits take root naturally. They won't work if the community feels they are too contrived.

Remember that while rituals and social interaction may play an important role in enhancing online community culture, they are **not a substitute for the core activities** of the community (e.g. generating and responding to messages).

Summary

Online communities develop their own unique cultures, shaped by factors such as how active the online spaces are, how formal they are, how humor is used etc.

The development of online community cultures is influenced by: previous relationships, power dynamics, the nature of the group's online interaction, and the evolving membership of the group.

Goals and objectives should be revised regularly throughout your project or community's lifespan.

General rules of "netiquette" and tailored rules for your community are ways that a facilitator can ensure that offensive postings and negative conflict between participants can be minimised and dealt with.

Facilitators can help to develop a sense of community online by: creating a trusting environment and ensuring commitment to shared goals, managing existing relationships effectively, promoting a sense of group ownership, using opportunities for face-to-face contact, and using rituals and celebrations.

If you want to learn more...

Online resources

Butler, B. et. al. Community Effort in Online Groups: Who Does The Work and Why.
http://opensource.mit.edu/papers/butler.pdf

White, N. 1999. How Some Folks Have Tried to Describe Community.
http://www.fullcirc.com/community/definingcommunity.htm

White, N. 2002. Facilitating Online Interaction: An introduction.
http://open.bellanet.org/km/modules/Downloads/uploads/Workshops/The_Hague_2002/OnlineFacilitatio
nCourseCurriculumOct2002.doc

Shea, Virginia. "The Core Rules of Netiquette" from the book "Netiquette" (2003)
http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html

Norms and Agreements:
• http://www.fullcirc.com/community/sampleguidelines.htm
• http://www.thataway.org/resources/practice/rules.html
• http://www.ascp.am/docs/tot/tot_content.html

Additional reading

Gozdz, K. (Ed.) 1995. Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning in Business. USA, San
Francisco, New Leader Press.

Jarman, B. and Land, G. 1995. "Beyond Breakpoint: Possibilities for New Community". In Gozdz, K. (Ed.)
1995. Community building: renewing spirit and learning in business. USA, San Francisco, New Leader
Press.