

Information Management Resource Kit

Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks

UNIT 1. ONLINE COMMUNITIES: A NEW OPPORTUNITY

LESSON 2. ONLINE COMMUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

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.



© FAO, 2006

Objectives

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

- understand the strategic application of electronic networking in development;
- identify potential development-related online communities in which you can participate; and
- define and identify electronic networking practices that can be useful in your development work.



Introduction

Why can online communities be a valuable resource?

In this lesson you will see in which way online communities can help you in your development work. As a first step, start by looking inward at your needs.

Let's take a look at an example...

Creating jobs in bamboo-based products for export



Creating jobs in bamboo-based products for export

Trupti had been working in her town on women's employment issues for 15 years. She had a deep set of knowledge, which she was always expanding.

One of the things she had discovered for **creating jobs was bamboo-based products for export.**

Trupti had more knowledge inside her head about economic development in a mid sized **Thai** town than a library full of books. But the growth of her bamboo projects had gone beyond her knowledge and she needed help.

Two years ago, Trupti's organization received computers and once a week she had **2 hours of reliable connection to the Internet.** Trupti started surfing the Web for information on bamboo. It wasn't long before she felt like a fire hose had hit her. There were fabulous resources. There was some absolute garbage too – sites that had no relevance to her work or had bad information. There were at least 20 programmes she wanted to contact to share ideas. But where to start? Her time is precious and limited. She had to make tough decisions about where to focus her resources.

With the Internet, it was both wonderful and horrible at the same time. How could she take advantage of this resource? Contribute to it?



Introduction



In the example you have read, one thing is clear: Trupti had to deal with too much information, too many people and organizations. How could she take advantage of the resources offered by Internet? Contribute to it? No one person can explore, let alone use it all. What should she do?

Trupti needs help getting information and staying informed about a wide variety of issues related to her work in women's economic empowerment and bamboo. Which of the following things would be useful for her?

- Search the Internet and follow up every link.
- Find an online community about bamboo product creation and export.
- Participate actively in as many communities as she can find.
- Find an online community about women's empowerment in Thailand.
- Ask her existing contacts for recommendations on online communities related to her work.
- Just stick with her local information sources.
- Identify and strategically participate in the online communities that are most related to her work.

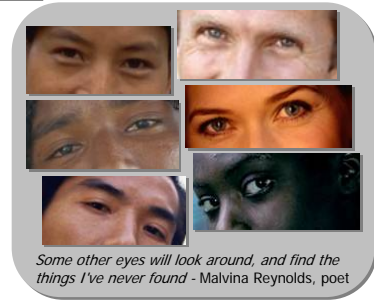
Please select the answers of your choice (2 or more) and press Check Answer.

Why are online communities useful?

Online communities bring us access to richness of diversity in every sense: culture, ideas, information, knowledge, experience, and diverse perspectives.

This richness allows people to both develop and share new ideas and knowledge, and do things that would be impossible alone.

Here are some examples of online community usefulness:



- connect us and put us in touch with people and groups we would not have met otherwise;
- help us find people we need in our work;
- help [filter](#) and evaluate materials, spreading the work over the network and supporting easy access to information;
- foster and strengthen partnerships;
- be the foundation for virtual collaboration, meetings and communication;
- offer new and diverse perspectives that can assist in problem solving and innovation;
- build and share knowledge; and
- allow groups to create and deploy advocacy action across time and with a wide variety of participants.

Communities as filters

When we use our communities to let our friends and colleagues know about our interests, or the problems we are trying to solve, the people in our communities can filter information for us. Our friends and colleagues can send us pointers to valuable information that we might not otherwise find.

We belong to more than one community

Remember that most of us belong to more than one community. This allows us to tap into many people, but it can also be challenging to manage. It is useful to think of how we participate in online communities along a range of involvement. People are involved in different communities at different levels, which is very appropriate.

←	→		
Rarely Involved	Occasionally Involved	Very Involved	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Occasionally read •Search for specific resources on an as-needed basis •Rarely contribute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Read postings on a regular basis •Contribute when there is something of particular interest •“Lurk” the rest of the time (Lurking: reading but not posting) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Read postings and materials circulated •Participate in conversations (online, offline) •Contribute thinking, resources, work to the network 	

One of the challenges many of us face is **managing our membership in many online communities**. There isn't enough time in the day to tend to them all. Communities are flexible and thus forgiving of more or less participation. So think of them as **flexible knowledge resources**. Be deliberate in how you are involved. It is useful to think about all your communities so you can strategically choose your level of involvement.

We belong to more than one community

List all the communities (online or offline) you are involved in. Then put a number by each one that indicates your level of participation in that community. 1 is very involved and active, 2 is occasionally involved and 3 is rarely active and involved.

Community	My level of activity

Please write your answer in the input box and press "Check Answer".

Online Communities as knowledge networks



We call all the communities that build and share knowledge with each other "knowledge networks".

Knowledge networks care about learning and sharing, to increase and make knowledge useful for a purpose.

They care about more than just passing information around.

Online Communities as knowledge networks

Let's return to Trupti, her women's economic empowerment, and bamboo. How could an online community help her?

Trupti knew she needed more information on the making and selling of bamboo products. But there was more. The more they succeeded, the more bamboo they needed. The women's craft cooperative had to start working more with local farmers. So Trupti realized she had to tap into more than one community. Here are the ones she first identified:

- Bamboo products community (what to make, how to market, pricing);
- Bamboo exportation community (who to market to, export issues); and
- Bamboo growing for her region in Thailand (bamboo agriculture).



Personally, as women's economic empowerment was her key focus, Trupti also wanted to connect with women in this area. She wanted to learn with other women, and contribute what she knew. So she also wished for a related community that focused on the woman's perspective of these issues...

Online Communities as knowledge networks

How might an online community help you in your work?

Take a moment to list some things you need and could contribute. Imagine the possibilities. Don't forget Trupti and make sure you include the things most close to your heart as well as the more obvious things. Communities thrive on people's passion!

Please write your answer in the input box and press "Check Answer".

Using online communities for development work

How do we use our online communities for development? How can they advance our development work? Getting information is good, but meeting our goals and creating change is better!

Fast forward 6 months and Trupti is now an active, contributing member to one online community, and monitors three others to support her work.

She hears through one of the communities that there is a new grant coming out for helping communities build local businesses. It requires partnerships with local communities, government and academic organizations.

Trupti posts a request on her community for potential partners. A group forms and the grant is successfully submitted. The community congratulates the team, and offers whatever assistance they can provide as the team begins their work. The team, in return, promises to share their learnings and results back to the online community.



Using online communities for development work

Here are some things to consider when using online communities for development:

- How you can **contribute** as well as gain from online communities. Online communities strength is built by this "reciprocity" or giving back.
- How the **filtering capacity** of your online community can help research, develop new ideas and share new knowledge.
- How the **thought leaders** in the online community can support or influence your work or cause. Can your online community give you access to these leaders? Can having their support make a difference in your work?
- The challenge of **competitive interests** in an online community. Sometimes cooperation is not consistent. Stay aware.
- How online communities can influence **policy change**. Because ideas can travel fast in electronic networks, you can mobilize many people towards an issue and amplify your voice many times over.
- Online communities can rarely be controlled because they are a **decentralized structure**. Do not plan on being able to impose a single view upon them. It won't happen!

Influencing policy and practice

A key application of online communities is **advocacy**. Online communities are very useful in advocacy because they can:

- draw on the knowledge and insights of a diverse set of people;
- move information and request action quickly via the Internet; and
- create visibility across national and organizational borders by making information available on the Internet.



In other words, online communities allow groups to create and deploy advocacy action across time and with a wide variety of participants. This can be very powerful. They do this by using tools like e-mail, Web sites, collaborative bookmarking, blogs and discussion forums.

Influencing policy and practice

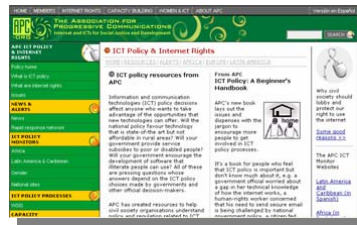
Online communities can help people **identify issues**, discover things in common and notice patterns that might suggest response and action. They can be collective “eyes and ears” about an issue.

Once an issue is identified, then potential advocates need to be **informed and educated** about that issue. Informed advocates are powerful advocates.

Let's look at some examples...



iTrain has created a rich resource, freely available on the Internet, about ICT policy. Within it people can learn about the issues, find out who the key players are and become informed advocates. Everyone has access. So this part of the ICT Policy network supports basic learning, prior to action. (<http://www.itrainonline.org/itrainonline/mmtk/policy.shtml>)



The **APC** (Association of Progressive Communications) site gathers resources to help civil society organizations understand policy and regulation related to ICT. Therefore the user can begin to engage and influence policy processes affecting ICT adoption and implementation at national, regional and global levels. (<http://rights.apc.org/resources.shtml>)

Influencing policy and practice

Once the issue is identified and potential advocates have been informed and educated about it, next thing is to **activate a community around an issue**.

There need to be a **strategy and specific actions** people can take. **Communication** may also mean using the community to alert media outlets (who often themselves monitor larger networks).

Different organizations and communities **activate their members in different ways**.



Click on the icon to read the examples

Some communities use mailing lists to activate members with specific requested actions and reporting mechanisms.

Influencing policy and practice



<http://rights.apc.org/action/rrn.shtml>

The APC has its Rapid Response Network, which profiles an issue and asks members to take a specific action.

This allows voices from across the globe to address an issue, even if it may have fairly local impact.

Sometimes a voice from the outside, added to the voices from within, can help create change. Sometimes the external voice can detract, so consider your situation.



<http://www.apcfricawomen.org/achievements.shtml>

APC Africa Women takes a more focused approach around women's issues, and focuses on the inform and educate roles, and then activates through specific events.

Influencing policy and practice



Finally, the time has come to **measure and revise**.

Communities can gather results and feedback from advocacy actions to determine how successful they have been and to refine strategies for future actions.

The community becomes a collection and analysis resource that is far more powerful than any one individual could ever be.

Influencing policy and practice

A group of agricultural extension agents have been lobbying for Internet access for their remote constituencies to enable transmission of real time market data. If farmers had knowledge of the best market for their products, they would be able to strategically and efficiently transport their crops and get the best price for them. However, national policy greatly limits who can provide the Internet access. The agents want to join and support the national advocacy movement for policy reform. They joined the E-REFORM Net.

In your opinion, which of the following options an online community might be able to support?

- It can provide Internet access to the remote farmers.
- It can inform the agents of the main issues and help them in turn educate their constituents.
- It can surface options for advocacy action, get feedback from community members and provide action instructions.
- It can buy crops from the farmers and resell them at the best market.
- It can report on the status of the advocacy work and policy changes.
- Once it achieves its initial goal, the community is recognized as a force in the country and more changes can be targeted.

Please select the answers of your choice (2 or more) and press
Check Answer.

Summary

- Communities bring us access to richness of diversity in every sense: culture, ideas, information, knowledge, experience, and diverse perspectives.
- Most of us belong to more than one community. This allows us to tap into many people.
- Communities can be defined also as “knowledge networks” when they build and share knowledge with each other, and care about learning and sharing to increase and make knowledge useful for a purpose.
- Communities allow groups to create and deploy advocacy action across time and with a wide variety of participants.
- Communities can help people: identifying issues, informing and educating, communicating and activating for action, measuring and revising advocacy actions.

If you want to know more...

Online resources

Full Circle Associates. Networks, Groups and Catalysts: The Sweet Spot for Forming Online Learning Communities <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/networkscatalystscommunity.htm>

The Global Development Research Center Organizational, Informational and Electronic Networking of NGOs <http://www.gdrc.org/ngo/ngo-networking.htm>

University of Pennsylvania - African Studies Center, Electronic Global Networking & the NGO Movement http://www.sas.upenn.edu/African_Studies/Comp_Articles/Electronic_Global_19411.html

The Global Development Research Center Organizational, Internet Use: NGOs in Action <http://www.gdrc.org/ngo/internet-ngos.htm>

France, T., (1997) GET CONNECTED How to use electronic networking to strengthen partnerships, UNAIDS Asia-Pacific Intercountry Team <ftp://ftp.inet.co.th/pub/sea-aids/info/info11.txt>

Terri Willard, T(2001) Dating the Decision-makers: Moving from Communications to Engagement http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2001/networks_engagement.pdf

ITrainOnline: Strategic Use of the Internet, <http://www.itrainonline.org/itrainonline/english/strategic.shtml>

APC (Association for Progressive Communications), Capacity building: ICT Policy for Civil Society <http://www.apc.org/english/capacity/policy/curriculum.shtml>

If you want to know more...

Online resources

The Global Development Research Center Organizational, NGO Strategic Networks
<http://www.gdrc.org/ngo/stratnet.html>

Strategy. Funding proposal for network strengthening project <http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/strategy/>

APC (Association for Progressive Communications), ICT Policy & Internet rights: A Beginner's Handbook,
<http://rights.apc.org/resources.shtml>

ITrainOnline: Advocacy & Lobbying Online: Designing and developing a campaign,
<http://itrainonline.org/itrainonline/english/strategicft.shtml?x=1743>,

Network Research - Knowledge Networks, International Institute for Sustainable Development
<http://www.iisd.org/networks/research.asp>

African SchoolNet Toolkit, African Education Knowledge <http://www.schoolnetafrika.net/1500.0.html?&L=0>

Clark, H., 1998. Formal Knowledge Networks: A Study of Canadian Experiences. International Institute for Sustainable Development. <http://www.iisd.org/pdf/fkn.pdf>

Pan Asia Network http://web.idrc.ca/panasia/ev-4509-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

International Institute for Sustainable Development Strategic Intentions: Managing knowledge networks for sustainable development, http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2001/networks_strategic_intentions.pdf

International Institute for Sustainable Development, Knowledge Networks: Guidelines for Assessment,
http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2004/networks_guidelines_for_assessment.pdf