Build relationships in online communities

"A 21st century model of professional development is inquiry-oriented and builds on teachers' passions and interests as a means of connecting locally and globally for increased student learning. The new model transforms the teacher's traditional network and supports building community offline and online, leveraging emerging technologies in building personal learning networks."

— Nussbaum-Beach & Ritter Hall, 2011

By Valerie von Frank

Working in groups face-to-face can be challenging enough for educators long used to working behind closed classroom doors, but virtual communities now offer new opportunities — and greater challenges — as teachers form online learning communities.

Leask and Younie (2001, p. 225) define online communities as "any form of electronic communication which provides for the opportunity for online synchronous/asynchronous two-way communication between an individual and their peers, and to which the individual has some commitment and professional involvement over a period of time."

Benefits of online communities include a sense of belonging and membership, reduced isolation, learning not limited by time, informality, learning dictated by the learner's needs, a personalized forum that relies on internal rather than external expertise, and "a freshness and variety that traditional communities may not be able to achieve"

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(Duncan-Howell, 2009). Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach and Lani Ritter Hall (2011) state, "Skills such as critical thinking, active learning, problem solving, the development of an on-line voice, and collaborative action research all are fostered through the connected relationships that build over time."

Educators who form online learning communities for various reasons must build and sustain relationships across computer bandwidths, often without the visual cues and interactions of daily school life. Technology makes it easier than ever before to connect, but collaborating takes more skill.

AEIN Network

In Alaska, for example, where some principals need two days and a plane to reach the central office, university faculty and site-based learning groups have been connecting for a half-dozen years around topics such as language learning.

Patricia Chesbro and Nancy Boxler work with the Alaska Educational Innovations Network as faculty with

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ARTICLES

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17,000 islands, one goal: Indonesia turns to online resources to create a network of school-based coaches
JSD, February 2010
An online learning environment brings coaches the skills and networking opportunities they need to provide support to teachers.
http://www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails. cfm?articleID=2012

A state for excellence: New Jersey boosts learning power with online video resources
JSD, October 2011
New Jersey bolsters its professional learning tool kit with Success at the Core, an online resource that offers strategies to improve instruction and strengthen leadership teams.
http://www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails. cfm?articleID=2349

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the University of Alaska Anchorage. The AEIN began as an effort to connect educators in schools that are separated by distance or other geographical challenges and create conversations facilitated by the university faculty.

"I think it's a better use of people's time — though not all the time," Chesbro said. "But you can have a one-hour meeting, get a lot done, and people can go about their business. I think it's useful and very cost effective, if people will just get good at it."

The school staffs use Elluminate software to connect at specified times, allowing Chesbro and Boxler as facilitators to draw a circle on the computer screen showing who is "in the room" and turn on the microphone for a participant to speak.

Chesbro said the online learning allows members to focus on issues and enforce norms of collegial conversation. "The different medium frees us up to behave differently in ways we wish we were behaving face-to-face," she said.

Online communities create a level playing field without power structures, Chesbro explained. She told the story of a young woman of color, just out of college, participating in an online learning experience with others who had greater experience and grander titles. Chesbro said the woman told her, "People take me seriously because they don't know what I look like. What I say is valued for what I'm saying, not for what I look like."

In addition, the lack of visual cues means that online learners are more sensitive to their interactions with other group members, Boxler noted. Participants must listen for verbal cues, pay attention to tone, and wait for a turn to speak.

These factors begin to help in building relationships, but sustaining online communities requires awareness of specific tips, these experts say. Five common themes emerge:

1. Center the work with purpose.

The best-connected learning communities have strong visions and clarity of purpose, Nussbaum-Beach and Ritter Hall write (2011). Boxler and Chesbro said one of a learning community's earliest, biggest hurdles is finding something that people want to come to. They said defining a purpose for the group is essential.

"Groups that are left to 'whoever shows up, let's talk about something' are not going to be successful," Chesbro said.

For example, with the language acquisitions network, the group found its purpose in a moral framework around language as identity, Boxler said. "We as a group had to find out why we were coming together," Boxler said. "It seems pretty simple, but it was complex."

2. Use a facilitator.

"Facilitation is about connecting people around issues,"

Chesbro said. "You're not so much driving as evaluating the landscape and bringing to light the themes."

For online communities, the facilitator must work hard to ensure the group is discussing and inquiring about a topic important to members. "Otherwise," Chesbro said, "they're not going to come anymore." The facilitator's role is to elicit from the group the pieces of work that will engage members.

Facilitators also must be sure that all voices are being heard. "If you didn't have a facilitator trying to bring all the voices in, you wouldn't hear all the voices," Boxler said. "Face-to-face, it happens all the time (that some voices are not heard). We resort to old patterns."

Facilitators also make sure that members are present beyond simply being online, a crucial role when participants can't see one another.

"The thing you always have to remember is that when they're not talking, they could be walking around the countryside with a glass of wine, so you really want to have the discussion be engaging," Chesbro said.

Chesbro and Boxler suggest facilitators:
- Be patient and listen for themes to emerge in the discussion;
- Be part of the discussion;
- Remain learners, guarding against seeing oneself as teacher or expert;
- Focus on a logic model to create intentional change.

Finally, Boxler and Chesbro said, online work generally requires two facilitators so that one person can assist with technology issues while the other focuses on the conversation, or one can maintain the dialogue while the other monitors the chat room to make sure that no questions are missed.

3. Encourage diversity.

Nussbaum-Beach and Ritter Hall write, "It is almost impossible to have something new emerge from people who hang out together all the time and think about the same things in much the same ways."

Dialogue is a powerful means of professional learning, Chesbro and Boxler emphasized, and technology enables live discussions with a broader group not bounded by physical presence. Having different voices at the table enhances that dialogue, they said, but garnering that diversity of opinion requires a little flexibility.

They said having different voices in the group at different times creates different dynamics that can be beneficial over time.

"We've learned we have to stay open" to participants, Boxler said. "You have people that sometimes come or don't come." The facilitator helps invite people into the conversation, keeps the line open to those who have been absent, and keeps members informed when they miss a session.

TEAM TOOLS

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Tools For Schools, May/June 2010
Teams can use this tool to guide conversations about ways to bring the world into their classrooms and schools.

• Let's Get Acquainted
Tools For Schools, May/June 2007
This tool can assist team members to get to know one another and help build relationships.

• Trust Factors
Teachers Teaching Teachers, October 2009
This assessment tool can help teams gather information about factors that increase trust in groups.

• Get Connected with Today's Tools
Tools for Schools, May/June 2009
Teams can use this tool to increase their knowledge of digital tools that are useful for their professional learning as well as for relationship building.

4. Build trust.

"The success of a connected learning community is built on members' willingness to create a trust-based community — to share, laugh, celebrate, push, and empathize with each other," Nussbaum-Beach and Ritter Hall write (2011).

Sobero (2008) says trust is created by:
- Developing relationships;
- Identifying with the mission of the community and with the other members;
- Generating feelings of belonging and mutual respect;
- Openly sharing learning while building on knowledge about the practice, co-contributing to build content;
- Developing community norms that encourage truthfulness, openness, routine collaboration, and the ability to address difficult issues or conflict.

Putting that into practice, Boxler and Chesbro said, generally requires protocols. They said they use a motivational framework from Raymond Wlodkowski and Margery Ginsberg (1995) that includes four elements: ensuring that all voices are included; developing shared meaning; respecting others and having a positive attitude; and engendering

competence so that all are learning together.

"Trust isn't something you can say, 'I'm going to work on trust right now with an icebreaker or a protocol,' " Boxler said. "That helps develop trust. But real trust comes when people are engaged in working around their everyday challenges, successes, and real work. … People develop trust by doing real work. So if we can create the conditions for people to share and do their work together, trust will come."

5. Focus on relationships.

Nussbaum-Beach and Ritter Hall write that online collegial relationships require members to share ideas and challenge one another's thinking. They say members should begin each gathering by sharing some personal information and encourage participants to be transparent. They also suggest regular celebrations of participants' news and accomplishments.

"Celebration of and for each other is an important component in connected learning communities," they write. "Community leaders, both in online and offline spaces, need to develop protocols for identifying and sharing good news."

Chesbro and Boxler said supplementing online meetings with some face-to-face learning benefits the group, and noted that the online, nonvisual connection already established helped build the foundation of the relationships. "When (the learning groups) got together, they really knew each other based on their beliefs, their philosophy of education, their experiences, and their identity," Boxler said.

The power of online communities

Online communities are helping more educators advance their learning. "With online communities, Boxler said, "theory and practice are sitting right next to each other to create new knowledge."

A study by Duncan-Howell (2009) found that teachers were more likely to use what they learn online because the knowledge was more directly related to their daily practice since online communities tend to be formed around their specific needs.

The technologically literate teaching communities have another benefit, as well, writes Jacqueline Kennedy,

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> Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

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> — *Nancy Boxler*

Learning Forward's associate director of strategic initiatives (2011): "Educators can continue to model and mimic the same innovative learning expectations we have for students, thus becoming 21st-century educators that serve 21st-century students."

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