Online Communities for Learning

create a culture by building a culture

Clarence Fisher

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WHY THINK ABOUT COMMUNITIES?

Learning is what happens when ideas run into each other.

Historically, most people lived in small, rural areas, so the number who could gather to talk about issues was small. People worked hard, long hours, usually tied to the land in a place and rarely had the time to travel and think about issues larger than the lives of their own families. This is why spaces like the coffeehouses of London, the salons of Paris and the various academies and societies of science were so important. Forums such as these allowed people to gather to discuss new developments in science, technology and politics. Countless books, pamphlets, technological innovations and advancements grew out of these places. They were truly communities of learners.

Time and technology have changed, allowing many more people access to information, and a voice to take part in the changes and developments in our time.

What hasn't changed is the importance of the community.

I'm from a small town in Northern Canada. A place where community is important, where knowing the people around you is expected, and where, when someone is in some type of difficulty, the community chips in, offering it's help in any way possible. But as I write this, I sit in O'Hare airport in Chicago. A sprawling place with people headed on travels all across the world. There are many more people in this airport today than live in my entire community. I've just finished spending a few days with educators who talked about working in high schools with 4 000 - 5 000 + students in them. In many urban areas around the world, this is the norm. Our students are expected to work and learn, to acquire globally competitive skills, in systems that cater to hundreds of thousands of students. A common theme from many of the people I have spoken to on this trip (and others) is their worry about these schools and spaces. They worry about students getting lost and falling through the cracks simply because their buildings are so large and impersonal. But this same concern rings true for people who work in many industries. In all sorts of places where people gather together to complete a task, the importance of communities cannot be overstated.

Our globalised world runs on knowledge and information. These things are the steel and steam of our time. They are the raw materials that we build solutions with and create new products and innovations from. Knowledge and information flourish in spaces that are connected and networked. In places where people gather to discuss things. In places where diverse ideas have the opportunity to run into each other. Yet we insist on the importance of preparing our students and our workforce one by one. Our world is filled with problems that are so incredibly complex that they will never be solved by individuals. Environmental issues, economic challenges and

cultural misunderstandings all need groups of people from multiple countries and backgrounds to solve them; yet we want to wait for single people, for the mythical genius, to see through the problems we have created for ourselves.

WHAT ARE COMMUNITIES LIKE?

There are many different types of communities. There are many different platforms used to create them. Yet there are five distinguishing aspects that allow us to identify a community:

1.) Communities have low barriers to engagement - Communities are spaces that are easy to access, join and become a part of. While some communities are open to only certain people (employees of a certain company, students in a particular school, etc.) and others might be based on a certain interest, for a space to be considered a community, once these initial barriers have been overcome, it should be relatively easy to sign up for, join, and begin to take part in the activities.

2.) Communities support people in their sharing and creation - For a space to be a community, the participants in it must be supported in their efforts of sharing and creating. They have feedback loops and established pathways to help people to create new things. As we'll see later, the idea of a community "making stuff" is one of the central tenets of their existence.

3.) Communities socialise and mentor - Communities often have people assigned to various roles such as welcoming newcomers, serving as mentors and ensuring that people always have someone to go to when they have questions or concerns. In online communities, mentors help people to learn the norms of a space. Many online communities take this further, holding face to face meetups and gatherings for their members.

4.) Members matter - In a community, members need to know that their contributions are important. People often take part in communities not for any type of pay or because of any requirement, but most often, because they believe they are places where they can make a contribution that matters. Whether that is improving an article on Wikipedia, helping people to take better pictures on flickr, or helping a student to a clearer understanding of a complex topic, the members of a community must see that they are empowered to take part in something larger than themselves.

5.) Communities connect people - Join almost any type of online community and one of the most active places on it will be the "other" or "miscellaneous" group. Many communities are serious places where people spend long hours because they want to find answers to difficult problems or learn new things. But communities are also places

of socialisation and connection. Communities that believe they are only about their topic can be cold, unwelcoming places. Having both personal and communal spaces where people can connect to each other in any number of ways is an important factor in contributing to the success of any community.

Each of these factors is true for any type of community no matter if it is based in the real world, a community that only exists online, or one that is a hybrid space that combines activity both online and off. Communities exist of all types and for all purposes imaginable. Changes in our technology make it much easier to create and support communities. As Ulises A. Mejias teaches us in his PhD dissertation Networked Proximity, communities no longer need to be based on spatial proximity (who's around me to talk to about this?), but just as validly can now be more concerned with social availability (who's available for me to talk to in all of my communication channels?).

A vital skill for our time is creating and motivating a community to action. Those who can bring people together and have them commit to a course of action, whether long or short term, have a great skill in our time of history. Communities come together, dissolve, change and evolve on a rapid basis. Seth Godin's tribes come to mind along with Clay Shirky's book Here Comes Everybody; both vital readings for people trying to understand how communities online work. This ease of organisation also means that communities can be organised for purposes that we agree with, and which we see as positive, as well as others that we see as negative. For example, online communities exist to support people who are overweight and want to lose weight, while others exist to support people in their pursuit of anorexia (pro-ana). The tools that are available make no judgements on how they are used.

This fact scares many educators away from engaging and thinking about communities. In the interest of their safety, many educators refuse to allow their students to participate in online spaces. I think this is doing a disservice to these learners for several reasons. First of all, if something is blocked or heavily controlled at school, students are automatically going to gravitate to these spaces when they are away from the watchful eyes of adults. Kids are curious. This is a natural response. I would much rather that they were led to, and allowed to participate in, positive communities while under the eyes of a caring adult rather than being left on their own to find places that might be more questionable in their motivations. I also believe that the skills needed to create and participate in online spaces for learning, and the ability to motivate these communities are just as important as any other more traditionally pursued in schools.

These technologies and capabilities are not going away. They cannot be "put back in the box" or ignored. Instead, they must be engaged, created, organised and participated in. They are ignored by educators and corporations at their peril. If you are not taking part, and telling your story in online spaces, I can guarantee that someone is telling it for you. And they may not be telling the story that you want the world to hear.

SETTING UP

People often make one key mistake when they consider starting an online community for learning. They start out by thinking about a tool. They learn about a cool piece of software or a website and they wonder about how that platform can be incorporated into what they are doing. This is called "bolting on" to existing practices, and it is a recipe for failure. Instead, if you are thinking about starting an online community, the key thing to start with is a series of questions:

- who is this community for?
- what is my purpose in starting it?
- who is my audience?
- what purpose do I want it to serve?

Only after you have some answers to these questions should you move on to other thoughts such as:

- what might it look like?
- what kinds of conversations are you envisioning people having?
- what kinds of spaces will be needed? individual? group?
- what kinds of safety and privacy concerns do I have? will my members have?
- what kind of behaviour issues will I need to deal with in my classroom? How will I do that?

And then, finally, move on to questions about the technology itself:

- what software / hardware will allow me to do what I want to do?
- what will it cost?
- what are the capabilities it has?
- who will own the data that is produced?
- can I expand it or add on other capabilities if I see that I need them?

These questions are mainly about learning, about content, about vision for the community itself. The technology is certainly important, but it's not the first thing to consider. There are many different platforms available: Ning, Edmodo, Wordpress multi user, Buddypress, etc. These are changing constantly. Updating. Evolving. Different tools will move your community into different spaces, possibilities and ends. They offer varying visions for community development. There are a variety of hosting options and require different types of hardware. These things are outside the scope of this paper but nonetheless do require a lot of research. But this technology focused thinking should only be pursued after you have developed your goals and a vision for your community. What is important is that a platform is chosen that can meet the needs of it's users, that allows for multiple entry points into conversations, that places users at the crossroads of multiple streams of information and that can evolve as needed. Remember the coffeehouses in London? Ideas were generated, grew, were argued, developed and organised through bringing people into contact with each other.

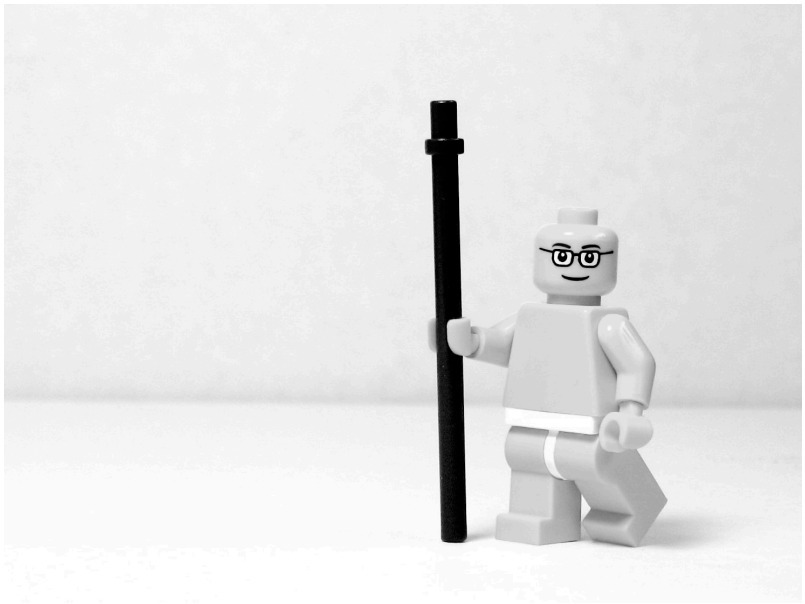
How does your space do that?

COMMUNITY ROLES

Online communities are egalitarian spaces that allow people from around the world to participate in discussions and talk about issues. The more open they are, the faster they evolve and develop. Closed spaces are difficult to keep alive. But, open spaces that allow people from anywhere to participate are not best understood as exercises in anarchy. Communities for learners will quickly devolve into spam filled discussions of the lowest level without tending, mentorship and leadership. The metaphor of gardening and growth has never been more apt.

There are many possible roles to establish within a community that will help your community to stay organised and achieve it's goals. The most common is that of the community leader / director / manager. Whatever the title is in your space, this is the person whose job it is to have a broad, overarching view of what is happening in the community. If the community is based around a group of learners, this person most likely will be a teacher or trainer of some kind who is directly involved with the learners. This person has the main role and responsibility of providing overall

leadership and direction to the community and its members. This person will be vital in setting the tone of discussions and for ensuring that the community is moving forward in its tasks. It is not the job of this person to take part in every and all discussions. They are not the source of all wisdom, insight and content. While the community leader will have a large role as a community begins, welcoming people, asking questions, and providing content and information to help discussions grow and develop, they must be prepared for their role to change as the community matures. Depending on a variety of things such as the size and the age of the membership that your community has been developed for, this role can be one that is very hands on; while in other communities this person steps back more into an overall leadership role who helps others to develop their own skills and passes on the day to day running of the space to others. There have been entire books written on the art of community leadership and many great resources exist online that go much deeper into this position and the responsibilities it entails. Check some of those out.



Depending on the size of the community, there are other roles that are valuable to nurture. For example, it is great to have people working in the position of serving as a community greeter. Taking the axiom of "don't bite the newcomers" from Wikipedia, the job of this person is to ensure that new members are looked after and helped over the initial difficulties that can be encountered in joining a new space. Technical difficulties need looking after, explanations need to be given, tours developed and offered to people who are new. New members will often need help learning the expectations, language and values that are honoured in a space.

Often in large communities, new members feel they have no one to ask for advice when they have questions. A greeter should be proactive, seeking out people

who are new and might have questions, but they also need to be available to anyone, no matter if they have recently joined or not. In any space, greeters are valuable people and should be honoured as such. They are the initial face of your community for new members.

A mentorship role is another valuable one to grow. Mentors are experienced community members who can lead small groups of people into new places of exploration. While these people can be there to help new members through initial difficulties like a greeter, mentors more often troll through a community searching and supporting users who are semi - experienced but who may have hit a wall of some kind in their development. An online mentor serves the same purpose in that space as one does offline. They ask questions, dig deeper, show support and work with small, changing groups. Mentors can work with small groups focused on accomplishing specific tasks very effectively.

It is important to remember that there are many people who may serve in these roles. They may be filled by students who are leaders in the community itself. They may be served by previous students who are willing to “come back” and spend some time working in your online space. Parents, community leaders, other teachers, or seniors looking for ways to connect with younger people are all great examples of people who may be called upon in supporting roles for your online space.

Outside experts are another position to explore in a community's structure. Similar to having a guest blogger write posts to bring in new ideas and perspectives, outside experts are people who take part in your community for a limited period of time, contributing expertise in a new area that your community is trying to explore. If a community is built around a core of learners, outside experts may be just that, experts in a field that the community leader feels is valuable, important and needed at a certain point in time. Outside experts bring in novelty, excitement and interest. Similar in role to a mentor, an outside expert may work with a small group of people who are focused on a specific development. While available to all community members, there may be several outside experts working in a community at any one point in time, each working to advance the ideas and member expertise in a certain field.

Another emerging concept in networks and communities is that of the lead user. The lead user concept grows from crowd accelerated communities of innovation. For example, researchers studying groups of surfers in Hawaii, hip hop dancers and snowboarders all found small groups of people, ranging from 5 - 10% of the community's population, who were constantly pushing the edges of equipment, technique and thought. These people would film themselves surfing and trying out new moves. This video would then be posted to a community such as Youtube. In a

short time their moves would be critiqued by others, copied, and improved upon in another part of the world. A positive feedback loop.
These people are lead users.

Communities sometimes feel threatened by these people. And while these users often need to be constructively engaged, mentored and taught to respect the norms of community etiquette, they can be your most valuable participants. Instead of being threatened by them, communities should consider them to be valuable resources and put them to work. Give these people additional responsibilities. Get them to help struggling members. Have them post their best stuff as models that other community members can reach for and aspire to. Highlight these users and their advancements. Interview them. Ask them where they are going in their work or what they are aspiring to do. By involving them with others it will help everyone's techniques and knowledge to advance.

STARTING OUT

All of the questions have been considered and a platform has been chosen. Initial roles have been worked out and a URL has been registered. The community goes live online. If you've done your research and are meeting a need, members should soon be coming in.

But what to do with them?

The first weeks in a community's life are vital. The initial weeks set the tone of a space and shape people's expectations about what happens there. Behaviour norms, acceptable topics up for discussion and expectations should all be led and clarified by the people in leadership roles. This needs to be done without too much of a heavy hand or new members will quickly find themselves leaving your space behind.

People arriving at your space for the first time should find a place that is visually interesting. It should be technically sound, free from all types of errors and working properly. While these things do crop up, they need to be quickly dealt with.

Before your community goes live, you should have plans laid and a store of material that you can use for the first week or two. What will interest people? What are you going to post? How are you going to involve and engage people initially? While these plans need to be flexible and open to change depending on how the community emerges, having a solid plan will give all of your leadership team some guidance as the space acquires membership and a personality.

It is vital to have a plan that includes involving your members in creative and interesting ways right from day one. A contest. A mystery that needs solving.

Controversial content. A game that people can work together on. It is very important that people feel connected and safe in your community early on. You can expect very few people to jump right in on day one and begin deep work without a base of trust being developed first. The people in your community need to spend time getting to know each other, developing rapport and trust before they will begin taking chances with their learning and thinking. This is the most important lesson about early community development. Get people to post a bio or interesting fact about themselves, their experience, or their place. Ask them to post a picture or a recipe. Hold a contest of some kind. Sharing an achievement or success with others can help people to open up about themselves.

It is only after this initial period has been completed and members begin to feel trust of the others involved in the community is it effective to push off into other discussions focused more around content. Of course, many communities will have new members joining on an ongoing basis. It is vital to remember that welcoming new members is a continual process. It cannot be considered to be "once and done." It is a process and members will require different amounts of time to settle in to the community.

In the Idea Hive community that my classroom is part of, we have jump started our community with several successful strategies. The first was a photo contest. My teaching partner Heather Durnin and I challenged our students to post pictures of themselves as a way for our fifty students to get to know each other. Once they started, our students posted 125 pictures for each other. These pictures are all still online and can be found here:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/mrfishersclass/sets/72157624951689704/>

We also started our students off with an interests survey where we used a Google form to do a simple survey of their likes and dislikes. Once they had answered the questions on this form, they had access to the results. This gave them a database they could use to find people they wanted to make contact with. Throughout the school year, many of the students referred back to this information and commented on how helpful it was to have access to it.

STAGES OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

After some period of time, many community members will settle in to some sort of routine. Lead users will begin to distinguish themselves from the rest of the community. New members will feel welcomed, valued and begin to contribute to discussions. New content will emerge on a regular basis. Keeping a close eye on the community is still just as vital as it was in the beginning, but if the community has met

a need, is growing and developing, you are probably safe to believe that your space will survive for a time.

Each community is unique. Each one has it's own personality, it's own life and concerns. That being said, Bruce Tuckman proposed in 1965 that all communities are similar in that they each will pass through different stages in their development. For example, when your community is in it's beginning, it is in the stage that Tuckman called forming. Just as it's name says, in the beginning stages of team or community development, the members are forming into a group. This stage typically sees fairly shallow discussions taking place as members learn about each other and learn to trust each other. There is usually little disagreement between members and people generally do not see themselves as a team or group yet.

This is one of the important reasons behind starting your community off with a series of introductory activities, challenges or tasks; it helps people to form into a group and advance beyond the forming stage. Once people have learned to trust each other, they generally become more group and task oriented. This will help move them into the second stage; storming.

What happens during this phase (as you can tell from its name) is that discussions will become deeper and disagreements will invariably arise between members. This isn't unusual and community managers need to work carefully with members through this process. Trying to stop conflict from occurring, while well intentioned, will simply stifle it, and drive it underground into other spaces that are not being monitored. This won't allow people to work through this stage of development, or allow the community to become known and respected as a place where people are free to express their opinions and work through challenging discussions. That being said, a community that is focused on learning must not descend into a free for all. Community managers must be present to guide members through conflict, to help the community develop standards for dealing with conflict in regards to acceptable language and ways members can respectfully and constructively express themselves.

The third stage of community development is norming. Norming is the "settled in" phase of development. People know their roles. Members circle in and out of the community. Some people become lead users and are comfortable in a leadership role while others fade out of the community, only taking part when required to do so. These are all normal events. This is the pattern of use that becomes evident as users settle in. Leading a community to this point is an accomplishment and this is as far as many spaces ever get to. This is especially true if communities are in place for a limited period of time. In the norming stage the energy of the community will ebb and flow. There will be high and low points. Community managers need to focus on

moving people into leadership roles, on welcoming new members, and ensuring that the community is an interesting and challenging place to be.

Those spaces that have dedicated, curious members, extended periods of time to work, and a leadership team who understands how they work best can move up one more level in Tuckman's stages to "performing." Communities working at this stage have members who are much more independent. They are able to lead themselves and operate smoothly to accomplish goals. They are able to solve conflicts mostly on their own and they see themselves as a team working together to build or accomplish something. They value each other's talents, skills and accomplishment.

A final stage of development in communities is mourning. This is a stage that Tuckman added later in his understanding of communities and the work that they do. Community members can invest significant amounts of time, energy and emotion in an online space. While the investment obviously differs for each individual member, some people can feel a keen sense of loss when a community shuts down. They may have made important friendships in the space or found a voice for themselves and a space to be creative within. When an online space shuts down, community managers must initiate a process allowing members to express their thoughts and opinions about losing this outlet. It can be a celebration, allowing members to reflect on their accomplishments while at the same time allowing members to grieve about the fact that they are losing the space to express themselves within. The need for this will differ between communities and will depend on the level of engagement as well as the length of time that the community has been together, but it is an important process in any community.

It is important to keep in mind that groups will circle in and out of the different stages, returning to forming (for example) when there is a large influx of new members. This is especially true for communities that last for longer than only a few months. Short term communities, put together for a specific purpose or to accomplish a single goal may work in a relatively linear development. Communities that are together long term, for several months or more, may see more progression and regression in their development. This is normal to see and a community manager who understands these stages of development can help move a community forward once again if it has lost it's momentum.

SUSTAINING A COMMUNITY

Everyone wants a community filled with engaged, curious, and interested users. No matter the purpose that the community was put together for, it is a more colourful space if people are engaged with it over it's entire lifetime. Generally, the initial period of time in any space is vibrant, interesting and filled with activity. Everyone is

busy learning how to interact with each other using the technology and engaging themselves with new content. It is usually not difficult to see growth and engagement early on.

But as time passes, activity may begin to drop off and sustaining that initial interest and engagement becomes an issue. This is true of virtually any community and is to be expected. These periods of time are challenging and the leaders of the community become much more important during these periods of time. Community leaders needs to find ways to reengage participants. Lead users need to be posting more content. Outside experts might need to be brought in so that members can work with people who are new, interesting, and who might have timely insights into the conversations that are taking place.

Leaders might have to run new contests, post controversial content to get people thinking, recruit new members, or find other ways to make the community an attractive space for people to communicate within. Cycles of participation are a normal part of community life and are to be completely expected. Community leaders needs to be vigilant about both upticks and downturns in a community's life and adjust their activity to take them into account.

Community leaders need to be keeping tabs on who is actively participating in a community and those who are disengaged. While participating or not needs to be a choice, leaders need to involve themselves with the highly engaged and with those who are not participating in different ways. The highly engaged need to be challenged and pushed to do more and do better. They need to be pushed to be innovative and to provide feedback for others. Community leaders need to ensure that these valuable members do not take over the conversations that are taking part in the community.

On the other side, community leaders need to attempt to draw the members who are disengaged out, and help them to actively participate in the discussions that are taking place. Leaders need to be aware that some people learn best while lurking while others are more active in a space. Members needs to be questioned about why they are not active in the community and asked if they need something in order to help them. In the end though, it does need to be the choice of the community member about how they take part. Forcing people to post a certain number of things rarely results in quality thinking.

CONCLUSION

As educators, connecting people to others, and to content has always been central to what we do. What has changed though is the ability to easily connect people around the world in powerful ways and structures.

Different platforms offer us different possibilities and the importance of the tools that we use to create communities cannot be overlooked. They must be evaluated carefully based on cost, needs, features and the openness they bring. Closed communities rarely flourish so the ability to expand as needed and join with others cannot be understated. The ability to import and export your data, add features, subscribe to and remix what you make is vital to what you do. It is too late to consider these things several months and hundreds of comments, blog posts and photos later. Do your research up front before you commit yourself.

Communities of all types flourish online. Building them, leading them, and taking part in the activity within them are skills which are much needed in our time. Everyone has a role to play in a community. Some are managers, others technical people, while still others showcase their talent by becoming lead users. Autonomy, freedom, play and encouragement need to be central concepts in helping any online space to realize its full potential.

Communities are about learning, research and content, but mostly they are about people and trust. Good people who trust each other will do amazing things. The importance of building trust among group members, of encouraging people to get to know each other and to work together needs to come before all things. Only when people feel their environment is safe and respectful will they be willing to be vulnerable and to take the chance of making a mistake in front of other people. This is when dialogues will open and learning will happen.

Community Development Resources

There are a number of great resources online that focus on ideas of community development. While few of them are aimed specifically at educators or learning environments, they do share a lot of great ideas and are all worth looking into.

http://www.communityspark.com/

http://blog.angelaconnor.com/

http://www.feverbee.com

http://blog.getsponge.com/

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Lego Gandhi: http://www.flickr.com/photos/dunechaser/2190991379/

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About the Author

Clarence Fisher teaches full time. He is involved with efforts to redefine literacy and what it means to be literate in our twenty-first century, technologically advanced society. He spends far too much time writing articles, making presentations, and thinking about the possibilities for learning.

Clarence's classroom has been featured in Middle School Journal, Technology and Learning. It has also shown up in books such as New Literacies in Action, The Socially Networked Classroom and Personal Learning Networks: Using the Power of Connections to Transform Education. It has also been featured on CBC, CNET, and MSN.

He has been honoured to win one of Canada's highest teaching awards; the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching. As well, he was also been named an Outstanding Middle Years Educator in his province, as well as winning several other awards for the innovative integration of technology into everyday classroom life.

Clarence lives in the small rural community of Snow Lake Manitoba, Canada and thinks geography can be irrelevant on our hyperconnected globe. This leads to the tagline of his blog: "Even From Here."

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