



# **Building Community Through Online Discussion**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Online networking is a valuable tool for students in higher education and in the world of work. The challenge for teachers is to encourage students to participate in online discussion so that they can develop communication skills and experience learning in an online community. This paper examines two experiences of online discussion, designed to develop online learning communities amongst first year undergraduates. It raises questions about students' capacity to participate and suggests that all students benefit if those who lack the skills, confidence or motivation for taking part are identified and supported from the outset. If teachers can identify individual students' needs, perhaps through an initial audit, then appropriate support can be arranged, while the arguments justifying participation in online discussion need to be explicit and persuasive. These issues are examined with reference to the professional practice of community development.

## **Introduction**

The building of a community for the purpose of constructing knowledge is a core function of written online discussion. Garrison & Anderson argue that 'the creation of knowledge in an educational context is a personally reflective process made possible by a community of learners' and therefore, they suggest, online discussion is a significant tool for realising the potential of e-learning in higher education (2003, p.22). Social computing, 'the practice of online communication and collaboration', is a technological and pedagogic development whose promise is only now being realised (New Media Consortium, 2006, p.3).

A community is more than a collection of individuals; it is 'a sense that members have a belonging, members matter to one another and to the group and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together' (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.9, cited in Brook & Oliver, 2003, p.42). Developing this

sense of community using an online discussion tool is not easy; just as some people remain physically or socially remote from the local communities where they live, some students shrink from joining a community of learners, either face-to-face or online. Communities don't occur automatically just because an online discussion forum is in place – even if the activity is, in the eyes of the teacher, engaging, stimulating and challenging.

This article brings some of the principles and practices of community development as a discipline to the experience of creating communities of learners online with students in their first year of higher education. It examines two examples of online discussion: one uses Salmon's five-stage model to develop each student's capacity for constructing knowledge within a social context (Salmon, 2000) while the other provides a forum in which groups of students assemble a collaborative essay.

The purpose of this examination is to consider why some students fail to make the most of opportunities for learning through online discussion, even where participation is required as part of an assessment. With a deeper understanding of students' concerns, teachers can invest in supporting students and explaining the active process of learning through written discussion right from the start. In particular, teachers will need to recognise students who are disadvantaged by a lack of confidence, skills or motivation for participation in an online community, and then work out how to build their capacity to engage effectively. Some students need to be persuaded to join an online activity and therefore the purpose of an activity must be absolutely explicit and expressed in terms that resonate with each student's needs.

## **Creating a sense of community online**

In its review of new technologies influencing higher education, the New Media Consortium (2006) argues that online meetings and conferences and professional online networks are becoming a common form of working for which graduates should be prepared; hence opportunities for experiencing this form of group work should be available to all students.

Wenger, who developed the concept of communities of practice, argued that learning is the 'social production of meaning' (1998, p.49) or a process of exploring concepts with other people, and so 'knowing

involves primarily active participation in social communities' (1998, p.10). One difficulty for the teacher lies in persuading students to engage. Palloff & Pratt (1999) suggest that the first stage in creating an online community is to define clearly the purpose of the group while Brook & Oliver (2003, p.45) stress 'it is purpose that encourages the group to form a bond.' However, a reason to engage may not be sufficient; even if the purpose is to achieve marks where online discussion is assessed, some students hesitate to take part.

Salmon (2000) recognises that students are developing individual skills and confidence within an online social setting and need to be drawn in gradually over five deliberate stages. In stage one, students gain access to a discussion and in stage two, acknowledge their motivation for joining in. In stage three, they get acquainted and begin to share relevant information. Stage four involves the active process of knowledge construction. Salmon refers to Jonassen *et al.* (1995, p.16) who argue that 'knowledge construction occurs when participants explore issues, take positions, discuss their positions in argumentative format and reflect on and re-evaluate their positions.' (Salmon, 2000, p.33). By stage five, students have developed sufficient confidence to evaluate their own ideas as well as the ideas of others in their group.

Brook & Oliver (2003) recognise that teachers have a responsibility for developing a learner's sense of community, initiating activities that promote community development. At the University of Gloucestershire, students can take an undergraduate course in community development qualifying them to practise in urban and rural neighbourhoods. Francis & Henderson (1992, p.2) explain community development work in terms familiar in education, 'community development is ... about the creative development of people', but further, it is a professional skill. It includes helping people to work together, 'to support each other, involving and giving power and responsibility to disadvantaged people, growing in confidence and competence through active participation.'

For teachers aiming to establish learning communities online, the task is similar, but a study of two modules at the University of Gloucestershire suggests that the disadvantages experienced by some students are well hidden. Students may grow in confidence through online discussion but if they lack sufficient capacity to participate, then they are clearly in difficulty from the outset. Teachers may need to invest more time in encouraging students to cross the threshold.

## The investigation

Two experiences of online discussion were examined in an effort to understand students' perceptions of using online discussion in their first year of study in higher education. The two modules are taken from Level 1 of a degree course at the University of Gloucestershire. The student group is diverse, including full-time campus-based students and distance learning practitioners working in local communities across England and Wales. Staff find that online discussion is a valuable tool for bringing this variety of students together in the same class so that they can learn from each other.

In the module *Management at Work*, students discuss issues in heritage, community and environmental management in discipline-based groups (three to eight per group). There are five online sessions based on Salmon's five-stage model (Salmon, 2000), each session consisting of two tasks. Students make a thoughtful contribution to each task (approximately 200 words) and at least one response to another student. (For more detail see Skinner, 2004.)

In a second module, *Action with Communities*, students (normally in groups of four) discuss the principles of community development. As they develop an online community, they work together to write an essay and the process of teamworking mirrors that of community development. (See also Derounian & Skinner, 2003.)

These modules were first investigated in 2004. The students' perceptions of both activities were reviewed through module evaluations to provide qualitative data. Responses to a supplementary questionnaire provided quantitative data on their sense of learning together. Only one in four of all students taking the modules responded to this second questionnaire leading to concern that the views of students failing to participate in both the activity and the survey had not been expressed. This suggested that a more penetrating method may be needed to reach students failing to participate effectively in the online activity. In 2004, the study of *Action with Communities* included the additional observation of the discussions themselves, providing considerable substance for analysis. Three discussions were examined with four students in each group generating a total of 266 messages. The researchers were participants in all cases of the written discussion so there was no need to ask for the students' consent to reading their contributions (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). However, when quoting contributions, their anonymity is protected.

In 2006, the research was extended. The students' experience of online co-operation was examined through a selected focus group of students taking *Management at Work*, deliberately including students who had not fully participated in the online activity. Further qualitative evidence was also taken from a module evaluation process designed by the students themselves and a questionnaire that focused on their specific experience of the online discussion. To gain a deeper understanding of attitudes to *Action with Communities* in 2006, a new task, the students' written reflection on the activity, was reviewed.

The question to be addressed in reviewing the evidence is whether students have the skills, confidence and motivation to take part in an online learning community.

## **Management at Work: the 2004 study**

In 2004 no attempt was made to assess students' capacity before the activity occurred. Instead, the activity was assessed after the experience. The group discussion for *Management at Work*, based on Salmon's five-stage model was already well-established. The evaluation of the module (involving 19 students) and the questionnaire on learning together produced *no* criticisms of the group experience, while some students offered explicit comments valuing the activity; for example, 'the diverse range of experience has brought together a good cross-section of people [and] added value to the whole process'. The reason for this approval could lie in following Salmon's model very closely. Students think about motivation, reliability and commitment early in the discussion and then gradually learn to trust other students. The tasks also pay attention to Laurillard's 'conversational framework' (2002), where students explain their own ideas and experiences before the teacher responds to what they already know. This method helps students to conquer their fear of doing the wrong thing; the task 'made me feel more confident and secure in my own knowledge and understanding'. Students appreciated discovering how to give constructive feedback and sharing different perspectives. 'This has been the most enjoyable assignment that I've taken and I feel I've learned quite a bit about myself in the process'. The advantage of staged tasks with timely, supportive and informative feedback from both students and staff was greatly appreciated. It underpinned trust and proved valuable for other assignments.

## Management at Work: the 2006 study

The findings from 2004 were very encouraging but only 25% of students responded to the survey, so in 2006 a second investigation took place. Six students (19% from the campus-based class of 32) failed to start the activity by doing the first task within the week allocated for it. This is not unexpected but it is useful to probe further. Three of those six students had a recognised disadvantage that limited their capacity for entering the discussions; one required support for serious dyslexia and the other two were using English as their second language. The remaining three students had no obvious reason for failing to engage; one of them (Student A) remained absent from the group for over six weeks, despite explanations in class of the activity's purpose and of technical aspects of using the discussion tool.

This time the questionnaire asking students after the event how they felt about communicating online, generated a response from 69% of the students (an improvement on the 25% of 2004). Anxiety about communicating online proved a significant factor as 23% of respondents admitted that they lacked confidence for communicating in writing in public. As a consequence they hesitated before contributing or limited their messages in both quantity and content. None of these students would have been evident to the teacher at the start of the course (respondents did not include the three students with a recognised language difficulty). Interestingly, more students lacked confidence for speaking out in the classroom (50%) than for communicating online. Eight students noted that online working was a less stressful way of communicating than face-to-face.

A group interview was then conducted with four students to examine their responses in more detail. The group included the non-participating Student A, two mature students and one with a mental health difficulty. The two mature students expressed their anxiety about the online discussion tool. One had no previous experience even of using email while the other, who had a working knowledge of information technology, 'still found it daunting having a [written] conversation ... I found it really alien.' The mature students were, however, sufficiently well-motivated to overcome their difficulties to contribute in the time allocated. One of them even persisted despite losing her first contribution twice when her internet connection timed out.

Student A, on the other hand, had no problems with the technology nor with this style of communicating and was confident that he

could do the activity as required before the deadline despite his lack of participation. Indeed, he completed all ten tasks, except for responding to other students, at the last moment. He was not interested in using the tool to get to know other students and sharing their experiences. He explained how his strategy helped him to manage his workload and his social and sporting commitments.

As suggested by JISC (2004) each student has individual needs based on their own personal approach to the activity, including different motives. The students with a registered disability or the necessity for language development were provided with appropriate technical or personal support as a matter of course. The whole class was given technical guidance and clear written instructions supported by explanations in class. Many students appreciated this support, but some remained uncertain or unconvinced, allowing their lack of skills, confidence or commitment at the outset to hinder participation.

## **Action with Communities: the 2004 study**

In 2004 the lack of participation by some students in the second module, *Action with Communities*, compromised the experience of community where approximately 70 students in groups were asked to write a collaborative essay online. In Group A, the three participating students were anxious from the first week at the absence of a fourth student and used message time to express their concern. In Group B, one student made a single introductory appearance and then left the group high and dry and worried about where she had gone. Students in Group C were distracted by one group member who took a long time to appear and then stayed away for several weeks. So for some students, the activities taught them what it felt like to be let down when others failed to participate; it also provided an opportunity to discuss community development concepts such as inclusion and capacity. Although most students (78%) enjoyed a sense of learning together in a group, 22% felt disconnected. They found it difficult to trust others especially through a fear of being misunderstood, while a significant proportion of students (44%) claimed they were not sufficiently confident to share their *lack* of knowledge with their group.

In *Action with Communities* in 2004, the explicit purpose of the group work was to write an essay. The teachers designed the activity to give students an experience of the community development process but this agenda remained largely hidden. Some students later realised that 'the task is about how teams work in real life' and three noted the value of learning to work with strangers, but others argued

that the activity was not genuine; 'a group of four with only a module in common cannot form a community, especially if they don't share motivation and goals.' This student put her finger on a problem; the teacher might assume that the students share the same sense of purpose in terms of doing a piece of work for assessment aiming for good marks when studying the same module, but this is not the case.

## **Action with Communities: the 2006 study**

In 2006, greater attention was paid to explaining the purpose and benefits of the online activity in *Action with Communities* before it started. Early in the module, and in a face-to-face class, most of the 80+ students took part in a workshop which required them to compare community development principles (e.g. inclusion, trust, negotiation, participation, consultation, integration, empowerment) and the process of group work with which they would be engaging online. In community development, the process is also the product; 'the way things are done is often as important as the end result' (Wates, 2000, p.18). Community development students in particular, need to understand this fundamental principle. There is a powerful argument that students cannot become community development workers if they are unwilling to experience and reflect on joining a community for themselves. At the end of the module the students were therefore asked to reflect on the process as a final, but voluntary, activity. 30 students (approximately 37%) took this opportunity. Only one student who found the experience 'very frustrating and upsetting' expressed negative feelings. Others made explicit comparisons between this experience of group work and local communities:

'the task turned out to be just like belonging to a real live community. One dropped out due to too much work, one had to leave through ill health. I feel that a successful outcome was achieved by taking ownership of the task.'

Students were aware of the diversity of their groups and learned to manage the differences:

'This assignment really highlights how people can perceive an activity very differently to one another and how priorities are very different between people within a group.'

'I have also discovered that each and every one of the team had their own individual skills that are very valuable an asset when it comes to teamwork.'

'This group work is kind of like a community and in order to get results we need to pull together to achieve a pass. Shared goals and aims, but perhaps not shared values and beliefs.'

Remembering the distress that students felt in previous runs of this activity when a member of a group failed to participate, the teaching team commented in 2006 that there was less anguish among participating members with more practical solutions. Students who had experienced difficulties with the process, generally saw these in a positive light at the end of the activity.

'It certainly highlighted the difficulties communities can have in working effectively together. However, that said, it was enjoyable and I'm pleased with the results.'

'I found the group assignment rather interesting and very much a learning curve. Working with groups is not as easy as it might seem. Good teamwork is essential when doing such a task as we were asked to complete. It was also interesting to see leadership skills come to the fore when dealing with difficult situations; this would prove to be very useful when in a real situation in community development, dealing with difficult and sometimes frustrating situations that need to be dealt with in a tactful way.'

The flavour of these comments is very different from the impression conveyed in 2004, where some students, in their frustration, argued that small groups with very little in common, let alone similar levels of motivation, fail to create a community. The difference may lie in engaging students from the outset in the purpose of the activity. Instead of focusing on the goal of writing an essay, in 2006, the purpose of the group work was explained explicitly as a way of understanding community development processes. This generated a more positive, problem-solving approach when members of the developing community failed to participate as expected. As one student noted, 'it has raised the importance of effective communication between people and the importance of taking ownership of a problem or issue to get a job done and on time.'

## **Participation in online discussion**

The inability of some students to contribute as expected damages the group experience and therefore the challenge for teachers is to maximise participation. Models of learning design created to help teachers construct online activity concentrate on the content of activities and the need for support during the activity (Oliver, 1999;

Salmon, 2000; Goodyear, 2004). Brook & Oliver (2003, p.45) note that the instructor's support is needed to address technical difficulties which are 'an unfortunate reality of life'. Some models stress the importance of linking the activity to students' expectations and motivation (Shuall, 1992; Boud & Prosser, 2002; Smith & Brown, 2005) while a JISC study reiterates that the teacher's art includes meeting learners' needs (JISC, 2004, p.19). Shuall (1992) observes that students' motivation creates a 'willingness to persist and contribute effort to the task in which they are engaged' while McAlpine (2004) notes the importance of gaining and sustaining attention at the outset in order to stimulate engagement.

Macdonald (2006), in her study of blended learning, teaching through both online and face-to-face learning environments, recognises that the teacher plays a part in building students' confidence. Confidence to learn independently is a key factor; Macdonald states that 'learning online requires students to study more independently than they may previously have been used to' (2006, p.115) and asynchronous activity 'presents opportunities to develop independent self-directed learners' (2006, p.47). If students are not already motivated to learn independently when they arrive at university, teachers have a responsibility to help, but this study suggests that those who lack confidence, skills or commitment are often invisible. Macdonald notes that teachers can help by providing accessible support, face-to-face, by email or telephone, to suit individual students' needs (2006, p.29).

Community development expert Nick Wates outlines 53 different tools for developing community in local neighbourhoods (Wates, 2000). Three ideas that surface from his case studies provide suggestions for helping teachers to build the capacity of their students for embarking on online discussion. The first task is to assess the capacity of the potential community at the start by conducting an audit of people's existing skills and attitudes. A skills audit 'is often done in a neighbourhood to establish what the community can do for itself and what extra help is needed' (Wates, 2000, p.198). In class, this audit could identify students who are confident with the technology or with written conversation; it may also be used to spot students sceptical of the process or those motivated late in the day by imminent deadlines.

Activities can then be designed to bring together students who can offer help with those who need support. Wates urges community developers to 'make use of local skills and professionalism within the community before supplementing them with outside assistance' (2000, p.20). Personal contact and support is essential. As Wates notes, 'the best results emerge when local people work *close*ly (our

emphasis) with experts ...' (2000, p.20). Teachers may need to make sure that students have a clear opportunity to establish connections with each other. The skills audit could be used to identify appropriate partnerships. For example, the confident but uncommitted Student A might have been encouraged by helping the well-motivated mature students who lacked technical skills. The teacher is always available if the skills already existing within the class prove inadequate for an individual case. A student who continues to delay engaging in an online activity beyond an allocated deadline may still require additional one-to-one support, either from the teacher or from another student.

'Getting involved ... should not be a chore' (Wates, 2000, p.15). Students should enjoy working in online discussion groups, so initial activities designed to develop a group identity and a sense of working in teams can be fun, just like local community events. A synchronous activity, perhaps with all students, can be designed to entertain. It also allows the more confident students to help the less certain or more sceptical.

The student disadvantaged by a lack of confidence deserves as much attention as a student with dyslexia or a visually impaired student to help them gain access to learning in an online community while 'time spent winning over cynics before you start is well worthwhile' (Wates, 2000, p.15). An investment in developing the students' capacity across the board will help not only the disadvantaged student, but also others in their group whose experience of a learning community could be diminished by their absence.

## **Persuasion and purpose**

Wates also recognises that some people will not join in. 'If people do not participate it is likely to be because they are happy to let others get on with it, they are busy with things which are more important to them or the process has not been made sufficiently interesting' (Wates, 2000, p.12). His last point is a central factor for online communities; students also need to be convinced of the purpose of online discussion before they will engage. New students may not be aware of the benefits that 'flow from building an online community of people who feel they are working together at common tasks' (Salmon, 2000, p.28). Salmon argues that realising the full value of participation is 'not inevitable but depends on the participants' early experiences with access to the system and integration into the virtual community'. Brook & Oliver (2003, p.43) remind teachers that

'regardless of the strategies employed by the instructor the decision to join a community appears to rest with the *will* of the individual'. Reflecting on the ideas of Tonnies (1955, cited in Brook & Oliver, 2003), they note that some students have a *natural will* to join the online community 'associated with the temperament, character and intellectual attitude of the individual' while others will draw on *rational will*, or the need to make a thoughtful decision to join. Students using rational will need persuading.

## Conclusions

A student's first encounter with online discussion has the potential to generate a positive or negative attitude to this tool as a way of learning. An investment in making it a good experience can affect a student's potential for learning throughout higher education and into their professional communities of practice. While many students are sufficiently well-motivated to embark on unknown territory that may involve both new subject matter and new technology, others lack confidence, skills or the commitment to participate effectively. Where this occurs, the experience of online discussion can be seriously compromised, not only for the student concerned but for fellow students who expect their presence and active contribution.

Teachers are accustomed to supporting students who are disadvantaged by an acknowledged disability, but may not notice those students who are deprived through a less obvious lack of skills, confidence or motivation. If teachers are to build learning communities online, then perhaps community development workers can help. First, people need a very good reason that provides the motivation for engaging in local action, and then, if they are to overcome their hesitation, they often benefit from personal support. A teacher's task is to identify students' individual needs, perhaps through a timely audit of skills and attitudes, and then to make sure that students have access to personal (and enjoyable) support from other students as well as from teachers, that helps them take the plunge and maintain momentum.

The emphasis on shared goals and the benefits of establishing a community of learners, in the workplace as well as in higher education, needs to be explicit from the outset. As well as ensuring that all students build the capacity to join in, a genuine appreciation of the value of participating in a group experience is needed *before* the experience occurs to encourage participation, so the arguments must be very persuasive.

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