



Creating Networking Communities Beyond the Classroom

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Abstract: In the summer of 2008, after a change in leadership, the Graduate Instructional Designer Association at UMass Boston embarked on a project to connect students, faculty and alumni in an online space. It was believed that this space, unrestrained by the spatial and temporal constraints of classroom learning, would help connect students with each other and with alumni so that they could extend the learning that occurred in the classroom, be that a physical classroom or an electronic classroom on Blackboard. This was not the first attempt at creating such a community of practice; however it has been the first successful attempt to date. This article explores our goals and how this community has successfully met them, as well as limitations—such as helping members overcome a perception of social media fatigue—that we still need to overcome in order to improve our community and to extend learning outside of the classroom. Helping members overcome such fatigue enables them to better help the community by contributing more content and greater net presence, thus contributing to the overall learning experience.

BACKGROUND

In the summer of 2008 I assumed the presidency of the Graduate Instructional Designer Association (GIDA), a student organization consisting of graduate students in the Instructional Design Department at UMass Boston. The Association had been a fixture of the program since its inception in the early 1980s; however, all activities were ephemeral. Each new group of officers pursued the management of the Association in different and often discon-

nected ways. This meant that there was little overlap among officers and little long-term planning. A lot of knowledge was shared within each cohort; however, upon graduation the knowledge each cohort created was mostly lost—thus the Association experienced periodic brain-wipes. As the new President, I decided to expand the scope of the organization, to make it a student *and alumni* association so that the dialog and learning could continue post-graduation; and the knowledge of one cohort could be shared with others.

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GOALS

Right from the onset of this project there were two overall goals. The first goal was to extend behaviors, such as information sharing, that we tend to see during face-to-face communication. The second goal was to break down certain barriers that kept our peers from meeting, interacting, and sharing that information and collaborating to produce mutually beneficial outcomes.

In a face-to-face classroom setting, a number of social behaviors can be observed before, during, and after a class session. These social behaviors revolve around individuals sharing information with their peers and their instructors. This information is oftentimes, although not always, about the subject matter of the course. Peers share book and article information, websites that make the content a little more clear, that expand upon the subject matter and that illustrate the point of the weekly lecture. Peers also provide personal examples that help illustrate concepts and solutions to questions posed. All of this information and knowledge, when coupled together with weekly class sessions, constitute invaluable resources that serve to personalize learning and enhance the student's understanding and appreciation of the subject matter.

Discussion and sharing isn't just limited to academic subject matter in a given course! For instance many peers exchange tips that they can take back to their work, including job leads for individuals seeking employment. Peers provide an expert recommendation system for the group that they are in. They provide recommendations for, among other things, which courses to take, what reading and activities they liked and disliked, which software to use to get the job done, tips for assignment completion, and whom they should consult for specific issues that they may be

having—such as seeking a good provider for corporate training in a certain field.

This type of behavior is abundant in many face-to-face classrooms. During the semester someone acts as a catalyst, breaks the ice, and turns on the faucet of information. Barring any unforeseen events, this information flows freely throughout the semester. As the Greek proverb goes “eyes that don't see each other frequently tend to forget one another.” When the course ends and people go their separate ways, they tend to forget that during the semester they had this great network of information. This physical separation serves as a catalyst to terminate, or limit, the sharing of valuable information. Therefore our first goal was to prevent this, to the best of our ability, and provide a path for the information flow to continue.

Our second goal was to bridge the many divides that existed. The main issue in the Instructional Design program was the issue of cohort separation. Many students in the program take the two “bootcamp” courses as a group. This in essence constitutes a cohort. Once those two courses are over many students compare the courses they are taking with the courses their peers are taking, and quite often they end up in a class that is made up of the same individuals as the bootcamp cohort. This issue was amplified by the fact that there were online-only and face-to-face cohorts. These cohorts would never be introduced to one another unless some of the face-to-face students took online classes as well. Even then, the percentage of exposure to fellow students from other cohorts would not be huge.

By bridging these divides we can help students discover other students locally, and grease the pedagogical function. If students meet online, outside of Blackboard, there is less need for icebreakers during the first week of classes because everyone tends to know one another. This facilitates discussions and learning because

discussions can be continuations of discussions started originally as a way of socializing. By knowing your classmates and instructors ahead of time, in a non-classroom environment, you are essentially lowering the affective filter (Krashen, 1995) allowing students to be more open to the educational process in the classroom. As a side effect to this, new cohorts can partake in the sharing and learning process of these communities *before* they even take their first class in the program. This can in turn feed back into those bootcamp courses to improve educational outcomes.

WHAT WE DID

The plan of attack was to create a community of practice for the Instructional Design program. A community of practice is defined by Wenger as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (2006). The service that we used is Ning, a white label social network. There were other options at the time; however Ning allowed us to leverage both the strengths of social networks like Facebook which allow each individual member a profile to customize, and such group functions like discussion boards, blogs, and groups for specialized topics. Our initial community guidelines, which asked members to respect each other, copyright laws and the privacy of other members, were intentionally broad so that they could provide a framework for member actions without stifling the discussion and the creativity of members with unnecessary cumbersome rules.

Our goal was to strike a balance between a write-centered community and a read-mostly community. A read-mostly community is one where members come together to share information provided by experts—in other words information that is *produced elsewhere*. “The primary focus in

these communities is to ensure that the community (a) always has available access to the product, and (b) that they can communicate about it with others. The foundation of these [read-mostly] kinds of communities is *access*” (Bacon, 2009, p. 35). Conversely, a write-centered community is one where members don’t *merely* enjoy things together, but rather collaboration goes so far as to help people *create things together*. The community in this role also assumes the role of content producer (Ibid.).

When creating the community we enabled many different options for members to communicate with one another. Blogs enabled members to broadcast information to the community, but at the same time allowed them to receive feedback on what they had written. Discussion boards allowed members to have conversations on topics of interest to themselves or the community at large. A community wiki allowed us to create, and structure, knowledge and information for easier access. A community calendar allowed members to share events of subject matter significance with fellow members, as well as provide a springboard for social outings.

One major element of our Ning community was to link to other resources and communities where our members may be. Examples of these are LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook. We used Ning as our home base for everyone to come and become a member, however if people did not want to become members, some information could also be accessible to them through other services such as Twitter or by RSS. By extending our reach to partnering services, even though the discussion could become fragmented, we are able to reach more members, and eventually convince more students and alumni to join the epicenter of our learning community.

SUCSESSES

In the first couple of years we've had a number of events occur that indicate a healthy, growing, community. Some general indicators of success are that people joined, they recommended the community to their peers, and they attended events and gave the organizers of the community valuable feedback.

In the first two years of existence our community saw a 200% increase in membership! Our attempt at creating a community of practice for the instructional design program was by no means the first; however, it was the first successful attempt. In six months we had surpassed the number of members compared to previous attempts, and our members felt encouraged to tell their classmates and fellow alumni about the community and recommend that they join. These are individuals who may have not known of the community or had never gotten an answer to WIIFM (What's In It For Me), a common instructional designer question. This enthusiastic support from fellow students, alumni and faculty of the program has created a warm and welcoming environment that allowed the community to expand. This in turn encouraged organizers, all of whom are volunteers, to provide more support back to the community.

Since the community was started, members have attended events in the area and sought each other out. In the Boston area the CIT conference is a prime example of this. Our members came together for an event that interested them and stayed to socialize. Other examples are previous EdTech Conferences at UMass Boston, as well as local ASTD events.

Finally, members have taken charge to carve out their own piece of the community. Members who have joined have had ideas for groups within the community—special interest groups such as the “show

and tell” groups to show off the instructional projects they've created and to receive peer feedback. Another community based interest is starting a podcast which brings together students, alumni and faculty to discuss current issues in instructional design.

CHALLENGES

The community faces three major challenges. The first is that currently the community is a read-mostly community, whereas we would like to strike a balance between read-mostly and write centered. The second is having members either not join the community or join and not participate due to social media fatigue. Finally, we have the challenge that many these days are facing: that of the web-native versus the web-immigrant. The major challenges probably stem from the belief that if we build it they *will* come *and* participate.

Our first challenge revolves around the fact that our community is currently a read-mostly community. In a read-mostly community the members of that community tend to consume the content provided by a select few individuals from external sources. Some of the available research (Zhang, 2001) prepared us to not expect many contributions from all members; however, we did not think that only a handful of individuals would be seen as the endowed content creators of the community. We expected an online community, due to its temporal and spatial shift nature, to be a liberating place that allowed members to express themselves, seek information from and provide information to others without the spatiotemporal constraints of the classroom.

Our second challenge was that of social media fatigue, also seen as information overload. By now many members who are inclined to join social networks may have a MySpace account, a Facebook account, a

blog, a Twitter account, and many other accounts on top of their work and personal emails. Joining and participating in such a community of peers represented a dilemma. Members, who want to keep in touch with their peers, join but they feel like they may not have enough time to “keep up with it.” A comment we’ve heard has been that students would become more social once the semester ends and they have fewer obligations. This seems to indicate that members feel like there is an information overload consequence that is *inherent* in joining such a community.

Finally, there is the challenge of getting web-immigrants on board with resources that are available only on the web. One thing that many instructional designers know is that people will invariably ask WIIFM. Of course, each individual will have different reasons for joining a community of practice, so the answer to WIIFM will vary depending on the person. Many web-immigrants are more sensitive to concerns of “information overload” that web-native members are not necessarily concerned with. We need to arrive at an answer to the WIIFM question posed by our web-immigrant members.

The fact that the community seems to be read-centered has created an interesting dilemma: the classic problem of what comes first, the chicken or the egg? Some members (mostly web-natives) have told us that they would contribute, or contribute more, if they knew for a fact that others in the community would read what they wrote and either respond specifically to what these members had written, or respond in kind by starting a discussion, participating in other discussions, writing a blog post, and so on. In other words they want proof that the community is indeed vibrant. Of course, solving this dilemma is something we are still working on.

LESSONS LEARNED

Early on in the process I thought that it would be rather easy to set up a community and that individuals would flock to it simply because it existed. After all, in both my face-to-face courses and in my online courses classmates seemed to have built rapport with each other that would, I thought, naturally carry over into an online space. The fact that we had built rapport with one another meant that getting more people online, and conversing and building knowledge would be a natural extension of our face-to-face and Blackboard based activities. Of course, I was a bit mistaken.

The first lesson learned was that you need a community manager that can guide the community. The community manager has a job that is time-consuming, does not have standard hours (i.e., 9-5) and often does not have a tangible dollar figure tied to return-on-investment. However, the effects of good community management can be seen by increase in membership, community activity and information flow—just to name a few things. One of the tasks of a community manager is to build buzz within the community and bridge the world of the community with outside entities that affect the community—namely fellow practitioners. One final issue that makes the job of community building especially challenging is that a community manager is not a PR person for the organization. Rather, the community manager is an ombudsman. This means that there is a challenge in separating your own views as an individual, and the views of those you represent. This isn’t always an easy task.

The second lesson is that the community needs a mission, and a plan to implement that mission. Before building a space for their community, organizers need to think about what the end goals are. What is the community trying to accomplish? Based on these guiding principles you can

design your online spaces and determine your interaction with members. This also gives the community a blueprint to follow. A mission and a clear plan make it easy for members to be part of a community, and it helps community organizers create succession plans. Another issue related to our mission plan is the concept of transparency. Transparency has come up many times in the past few years in a number of different facets of our lives. Communities of practice are no different. Communicating change to the community, be it the addition of a service or a removal of an existing one, is important in making the community feel like this is *their* place, that they have a say in what happens. A corollary to this is that a community manager shouldn't be afraid of negative feedback and suggestions. This type of feedback only serves to improve the community.

The third lesson is that you need some dedicated volunteers. An online community is like a high school dance. There are a few brave ones that take to the dance floor right away, and there are many that sit on the sidelines looking on. Dedicated volunteers in an online community serve as those few brave ones that take to the dance floor, and encourage others to participate as well. If only one or two "tech savvy" people contribute in the community, it may feel a bit awkward to join in. However, if more and more people contribute (or getting onto our metaphorical dance floor), this encourages others to participate and we've got the beginnings of a knowledge sharing and knowledge building community. If few people participate, we don't have a community of practice, but rather a simple online group.

Finally, we've learned that technology won't always work. Sometimes it is the *technology* that just does not work, and other times it's how people *interact* with the technology that doesn't work. Leaving community members to fend for themselves isn't a great way to encourage the

community. As such, one of the duties of community leaders and volunteers is to help fellow members when technology does not work.

AUDIENCE REACTION

The audience of this CIT presentation was composed mostly of Instructional Designers working both from the higher education and the corporate domains. The main questions that came up are questions about using these communities as a possible replacement for textbooks in classes and general questions about the logistics of community management.

As far as members becoming disagreeable or posting on controversial topics are concerned, personal experience in moderating large communities of practice gave me the ability to have a "gut feeling" about such interactions among members. For new moderators of our community, however, who may not have had such experience, the *Air Force Web Posting Response Assessment* flowchart is a great job aide. It displays, in an easy to follow flowchart, what my previous experience as a moderator has taught me and it codifies an organizational response to potentially troubling posts. As far as copyright compliance is concerned, if moderators discovered that some sort of information were posted in violation of copyright, that content would be removed and a moderator would speak to the member who posted it to let them know that this type of activity can endanger the community. Of course it should be noted that in our community I have noticed neither disagreeable behavior nor any copyright violation. Let me start with the issue of the logistics of community management. The audience wanted to know how many hours are spent weekly managing the ins and outs of such communities, and what happens when friction is created by members that break the rules.

The fact of the matter is that many hours are spent per week on the management, maintenance and expansion of the community. The community manager needs to keep an eye out for members who've got questions, see if he can point people to the right sources of information, be attentive to members' needs and bring those needs up to the right people within the organization. In addition, the knowledge that is created needs some management and structuring. Being a community manager is not a 9-to-5 job, as a recent instructional designer blogger wrote (Jarche, 2009). The community manager may put in a regular work week's worth of hours into managing a community, but it may not seem like work because these hours are distributed over the whole week.

Finally, there was the idea brought up of using such communities as textbook replacements because they are more agile than the traditional textbook creation process. As I stated during the CIT 2010 presentation that informs this essay, we don't force the instructors to use our community in their courses. If the instructors deem the community to be useful in their pedagogical practice that is great; however, that determination is up to each individual instructor. My personal belief is that it is true that communities of practice are, in many cases, ahead of the curve compared to textbooks. However, in the classroom, virtual or physical, students are there to learn the basics first and then move on to things that are slightly ahead of the curve. I am certain that active communities of practice can supplement textbooks and classroom learning but the determination of where precisely such communities fit into specific courses as a source of information is up to the instructors. The issue of textbooks and how communities of practice can enhance or replace them in the classroom is a bigger issue and it deserves its own research to truly do it justice.

CONCLUSION

A lot has been learned from creating, managing and maintaining our community of practice for the Instructional Design program at UMass Boston. The main lesson learned was that if you build it, they won't necessarily come, and if they do come, they may not necessarily contribute. Just like face-to-face interactions, online interactions need a friendly environment and ice breakers to get members engaged and participating. In the grand scheme of things, this community is still young and given our current evidence I wouldn't necessarily call it a great success. However, the seeds have been planted and there is great potential both for the community and the members that comprise it.

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