

EDTC 816
Advanced Building Online Communities
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Assessment 2: Educational Online Community Analysis

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Educational Online Community Analysis

Introduction

In an effort to glean insights into the organizational strategies of online communities, The Summit Learning Teacher Community, which is a closed Facebook group — the membership of which is available only to Summit Learning teachers — has been analyzed. The virtual community offers teachers a space where “Educators can connect with each other, collaborate and share best practices and curriculum, help each other through problems, and learn about Summit Learning Program events” (J. Fries, personal communication, March 7, 2019) and is open to schools that have adopted their learning management system (LMS), the locales of which span across the United States (see Appendix A for the interview).

The community boasts a membership of 3,535 teachers and is moderated by sixteen individuals, all of whom are affiliates, either working for the entity itself or organizations of which the Summit Learning LMS is a constituent, such as the Chan Zuckerberg initiative (“Summit Learning Teacher Community,” 2019).

Regarding tools for communication among members, there are several links in the navigation bar which afford various venues in which discourse can take place. Among them is a link to the discussion forum, where teachers share their experiences working with the platform. Chats exist where members create group talks that are dedicated to a specific topic. An announcement page is available for group administrators to post information on upcoming events or activities to engage the online community. A member page is present for members to connect more directly with other teachers. There is also an event page that details various convening and a photo and video page, in which notable moments in schools and classrooms are highlighted.

Through this online community and its various features, group moderators seek to keep teachers abreast of the events of the program.

Purpose of an Online Community

In the attempt to accomplish the first goal of growing the online community for like-minded individuals, the organization established a Facebook group, dedicated to creating and sustaining the connection among the group members. As stated in the interview, [W]e wanted to create a place for educators to build a community, to connect and collaborate with each other.” (Fries, 2019).

How successful such a community is shaping out to be is related to the levels of collaboration associated with the quality and quantity of posted contributions. The engagement level of the community members is a complex entity comprised of multiple criteria, including but not limited to their level of motivation (Kraut & Resnick, 2012).

The motivation for participating in online communities is similar to the motivation for participating in offline communities. From the psychological perspective, the motivation is driven by the expectancy and value. According to Kraut & Resnick, the expectancy is the realized probability that performed actions will trigger the anticipated outcome, and the value is the satisfaction of receiving the expected outcome (2012).

In analyzing the responses from Facebook group moderators, we noticed that they stressed the importance of the group’s value to their membership, which is related to the role of motivation in contributing to the group. Their focus is more geared towards helping educators rather than the volume of posts. By recognizing the importance of collaboration among the members, the moderators add to the value of enthusiasm among the participants, which encourages further contributions.

In the attempt to accomplish its second goal of growing and sustaining a successful business, the organization utilizes its online community to serve a channel for distributing information from the organization leadership to its members. Fries (2019) stated, “We also want to be able to disseminate information from our program to our educators.” In business terms, the company engages in the networking campaign with its clients who are the users of the company’s product. Such information sharing a top-bottom approach is a powerful marketing tool for promoting business relationship and strengthening customer loyalty (Barnet & Ferris, 2016).

Actions to Accomplish Goals

The community continues to grow as the designers ensure that goals are being met. This is a multi-layered process that involves support, encouragement, and networking. Educators who are familiarizing themselves with Summit Learning are urged to post questions they have to get better acquainted with the platform. The administrator and moderators ensure their questions are answered, and resources are shared amongst the community. This type of dynamic plays to the strength of the platform. Kraut & Resnick believe, “In online communities, members’ frequency of interaction with others is a major determinant of the extent to which they build relationships” (as cited in McKenna, Green, and Gleason, 2002, p. 92). The exchange of information, support, and resources is a major goal of the platform where bonds are being solidified.

One of the things that they seem to grapple with is deciding if it would benefit the community to create subgroups as the community grows. The concern is having the capacity to monitor the clusters and if that approach would continue to support newcomers. “Our community creates one in which people are frequently posting, and if we started grouping by cohort, we wouldn't have experienced people able to share what is working...” (Fries, 2019). In order to

keep the platform viable, the succession of matters should remain as they are unless or until members express otherwise. The community is still growing which is a strong indicator that member needs are being fulfilled.

In addition to online communication, the platform's supportive services extend beyond just digital interactions. As other avenues to solidify commitment, they provide professional development sessions in schools, appoint school leaders and mentors. These efforts have been captured and recorded in their introductory video, where participants share their experiences with the product. This is another way of giving members a sense of belonging and building commitment. They have set a collaborative stage, both on and offline, and presence on their website, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and podcasts certainly demonstrates their commitment to preserving a pulsating community.

Metrics

Among the factors that the moderators use to measure their success, the percentage of community members, as a whole, who become members of the online group are taken into consideration, as well as turnaround time for members receiving quality feedback.

Fries (2019) points out:

The biggest goal we track is the percentage of teachers in the program who join our group - we want to encourage teachers to get set up, and then we can see the yearly growth in terms of the number of members. The softer more important questions [are as follows]: Is every teacher getting the support they need [and is it being delivered] in a timely manner?

Members will generally communicate with one another. However, there are times when administrators will join a discussion in support and/or share resources, in addition to making

themselves available to individuals if necessary. The quality of interactions that take place is another indicator of success. As was stated in the interview, aside from teachers receiving the support they need, “We want to make sure that...[the posts are] adding value and...[that they create] an authentic environment to really hold true to it being a space just for teachers to connect with each other” (Fries, 2019). Essentially, the group’s administrators want to ensure that interactions are conducive to creating a candid environment where teachers can vocalize their needs and be helped by their peers, in which case, having a large community is necessary, as different individuals can offer unique perspectives and insights into a given scenario. It is to this effect that the group’s administrators concern themselves with the quality of the interactions that take place within the community, as well as the frequency and efficiency of these interactions.

Conclusion

The organization is successful in maintaining and growing its online community. Since its inception three and a half years ago, its population has grown to over thirty-five hundred members. The online group leadership team cares about the value added to each member and closely monitors the group activity. The organization recognizes the role of the community of practice and the roles of individual practitioners (community members) in sharing their knowledge (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009).

To a greater extent, the online community leaders are promoting learning from each other and learning together. These are the underlying elements of the organization, as defined by Senge (2006) in the Fifth Discipline. From this perspective, the organization can be considered successful in accomplishing its goals.

To pursue their goals in sustaining and further growing the membership, we recommend employing some of the existing data analytics tools provided by Facebook. Currently, the group moderators utilize Group Insight engagement metrics which provide monthly reports for the number of overall comments, posts, responses to some degree, but do not interpret these numbers as criteria for success.

The Facebook Analytics tool may assist with additional information on the members' behavior in the group, the time they spend reading vs. contributing, the frequency of participation, etc. (Facebook Analytics, 2018). It may be useful to know if certain topics provoke a higher rate of response, or other details, such as frequently used time of the day or day of the week. Having this knowledge can allow them to better utilize other features offered by Facebook, one of which is particularly noticeably underutilized by the members: the group chat page. If the groups administrators use the data yielded by the Group Insight engagement metrics to determine what topics generate the most responses, they can create a chat dedicated specifically to that topic. In doing so, the group administrators would be espousing the perspective of technology stewarding, which involves "...a naturally outcome of taking care of a community that's using technology to learn together" (Wenger, White and Smith, 2009, p. 827). Essentially, the administrators would be using the data to identify topics that generate frequent responses, citing them as areas of need and subsequently creating a group chat to address that need. In doing this, members may be encouraged to start their own group chats, should they notice any topics in the discussion board that may be of particular interest to a subset of individuals within the group.

Collaboration

Denise started a shared Google document, which we used as a common workspace for quick writing, commenting and drafting, and a dedicated WhatsApp channel for the three of us to use and communicate efficiently. As we formed a 3-people community for working towards a common goal of this assessment and employ various technological tools, we were able to experience and integrate the technology stewardship (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009). We used various online channels to collaborate and rework the interview questions, bringing their total number to five, but without losing focus of the assignment.

We began by collaborating on locating an organization and scheduling interviews but ran into issues finding the education group and getting a commitment for the interview. Each of us reached out to several contacts, and finally, Adnan and Denise were able to confirm and hold the interviews with the representatives of different learning communities. Denise conducted a 35-minute Skype interview with Dave Sperling from Dave's ESL Cafe, and Adnan communicated with administrators from the Summit Learning Teacher Community. We collaborated and decided to use Adnan's contacts, especially since the answers were provided by three (instead of one) administrators of the group.

Taking into account that Adnan is currently a member of the online community we used for this assignment, we split the workload accordingly. Adnan answered questions 1 and 4 and continued to be a liaison to the group. Emily answered question 2 and mainly contributed to questions 5 and 6. Denise answered question 3, contributed to question 6 and did the last edits.

Overall, it was a good experience, but with an added level of stress in the beginning, when we had difficulties finding the educational online community willing to interview and

provide answers to our questions. Nonetheless, the experience will be an advantage in the last assessment of creating our own online community.

References

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Appendix A

Interview Conducted by Adnan Ezad

(1) What is the main purpose/goal of the online community?

We wanted to create a place for educators to build a community - to connect and collaborate with each other. We also want to be able to disseminate information from our program to our educators, but it's definitely a balance and requires intentional thought on when and how often we post and always being conscious about keeping this as a place for educators to get questions answered from people within their context.

(2) How have you gone about meeting these goals?

To that end, we value our progress about teachers coming together more-so than their engagement with our posts. We have other channels between school leaders, Summit Learning mentors, the helpdesk tickets, in person PD, etc. for people to get their help, so we want to create a place where they look to each other. You'll see that it's really rare that people *don't* get comments or questions on their answers, and that's something that we really value.

(3) How does use of this particular platform impact the realization of the community's goals?

We don't have much experience with a lot of different tools and Facebook was both our initial sponsor and the one we're most familiar with. We really like the search functionality (i.e. if you search eligibility, you'll find sports policies a lot), but people don't search that often nor do they use the tagging system. Creating and holding strong norms is a challenge. We see that everyone in one group is a big asset - at first, based on our size and our goals of creating an engaging community - and we're not sure if we'll ever move to a place where We (rather than educators) will create more specific context groups (i.e. all Science teachers, 5th grade teachers on the West Coast, etc.). The other big consideration is our capacity - we're so limited especially when we were just getting started (and remember, our program is only 3.5 years old!), and we didn't know if we could monitor multiple groups and make sure people were getting their questions answered and stay on top of any red flags. Our community creates one in which people are frequently posting, and if we started grouping by cohort, we wouldn't have experienced people able to share what's working and the same thing can be said by context too. We have a challenge at considering when to invite them to the group because we don't want to overwhelm new-to-Summit teachers (more than they already are) before they even come to Summer training. By being on Facebook, too, we're actually creating a low-barrier, high-engagement community because it's *something people do as part of their daily life*, rather than say a discussion board in which you'd need to log into specifically in order to get your questions answered.

(4) What are ways to motivate participation and contribution? What are some of the pitfalls?

We have yet to see engagement decrease significantly - again, it's rare that a question doesn't get a response. We've thought about having conversation starters but couldn't generate ones that really felt authentic and were not fishing for a generic question like "what's a challenge you overcame this week," - we want to make sure to always add value. Even when we post a platform update or a PD resource or a call for research, we want to make sure that it's adding value and it creates an authentic environment to really hold true to it being a space just for teachers to connect with each other. If we generated questions and just linked to help tickets, it wouldn't serve that purpose.

(5) How do you gauge the extent to which your community's goals are met?

The biggest goal we track is the % of teachers in the program who can join our group - we want to encourage teachers to get it set up and then we can see the year over year growth in terms of the number of members. The softer more important questions: Is every teacher getting the support they need in a timely manner? That's what we really care about - and occasionally, we'll hop in with a resource or tag some educators or follow up 1:1 if we can. There are great Group Insight engagement metrics on Facebook that show us things like monthly activity (overall comments, posts, responses). We look at those, but they don't inform our success criteria.

Where does this resonate with your experience? Where does it differ? One consistent theme from my conversations is that we're anxious for your feedback (what do you like and where can we be more effective?) and curious about your research (what best practices are you finding that we can incorporate to make it even stronger?)! Can't wait to hear from you next!