

Building Virtual Communities

A Seminar Facilitated by Thomas, Edward, Maria and Kim
January 30 - February 5

Before facilitation. The experience of planning our seminar activities provided rich insights into online communication. In particular, the planning process revealed how both asynchronous and synchronous communication tools can be utilized to help achieve a common goal. Weeks before our facilitation seminar, our group decided to collaborate asynchronously in a shared Google folder (see screen shot below). This communication tool allowed the sharing of information and ideas to occur at different times, which was necessary based on all of our busy schedules. This proved to be an effective way to keep all members in the group “in the loop.”

synchronous meeting helped build the foundation for our week-long seminar, Building Virtual Communities. This experience informed our decision to invite our colleagues to a Google Hangout during our Monday night synchronous session.

It's tough to say whether synchronous or asynchronous is more effective, as we felt both spaces achieved the intended purpose. The Google Suite provided us with lots of flexibility to stay connected almost effortlessly. For sharing documents, copying down ideas, and having 'planning documents' the asynchronous google drive space is perfect. This allows members of the group to add different components at different times for the others to review. This is very useful for facilitators who all run on different schedules. However, when it came down to synthesizing ideas, piecing together tangible pieces of the seminar, and finalizing activities, the synchronous meeting was undeniably the best. What was amazing was the discovery that, regardless of where each of us was in our knowledge of how 'Google docs' worked, it was revelatory to be able to collaborate and work real-time on the composition and editing of our shared documents. Seeing how we were able to accomplish so much in relatively little time while working together from disparate locations showed the true potential of the tools available in the Web 2.0 world and how applicable they are to our students in our work life.

During facilitation. "Do not fear failure." This was a running theme throughout our facilitation week. Firstly, one of our goals during the asynchronous activities was to establish the conditions under which our OLTD Community could grow. The rationale behind the Google + Community was to create a space for our cohort to communicate with one another. Communication in this space could be informal or related to course content, just the way it naturally occurs within the framework of the traditional classroom. Something we learned from this experience was that not everyone is equally as comfortable engaging in online social networks as others (even in a group of OLTD learners). Some participants are more than happy with the status-quo of current social presence and sense of community in our cohort, yet others wanted much more. It's sometimes difficult for people to engage in non-course related ideas when they are so focused on their professional lives, but it is dropping those boundaries that really helps online communities to thrive.

Our synchronous activity began with a Google+ Community walk-through and web tour. Next, we ventured into Google Hangouts. This experience was all about surviving technological glitches and taking risks while exploring new territories- something we face in our teaching practice. "Taking the helm" in an unpredictable "live" event was scary, but exhilarating. Again, the true test of how community is built is the comfort level in members of the cohort to take risks knowing that they are going to be supported even if things do not go according to plan. By going out on a limb, we have had first-hand experience in seeing the value of, "Do Not Fear Failure". The rest of the cohort seemed equally appreciative.

After facilitation. Reflecting on our week-long facilitation began with an enormous sigh of relief! We have organized our reflections under the headings: strengths, challenges, and things to think about next time. This reflection was completed asynchronously using a shared Google Doc.

Strengths. Being able to accept our own weaknesses and still feel able to contribute, feeling confident that our team would help each other out if any of us got into difficulty doing the tasks, and the ability of team members to effectively share their expertise were all major strengths that we felt throughout the entire process. We bonded really well as a seminar group (especially during synchronous sessions), and it was this bonding that really made us feel 'safe' facilitating the week. Our approach to the Monday night session, to take risks with the possibility of failure (which happened) was only possible due to our feeling of safety within the group. This sense of community, this belonging, was a true testament that community is important to most learners.

Challenges. Personally trying to come up to speed or even stay abreast of the other team members' technological ability and savvy.

Also dividing up tasks and knowing who will do what was sometimes tricky. It is difficult to time manage and delegate when all 4 members are to do equal parts. We managed well, but it was difficult to not constantly be feeling 'am I doing enough'?

Things to think about next time.

When the opportunity comes up again to facilitate with a group like this, it would be beneficial to test-run each activity on a larger scale to ensure smooth implication (especially synchronous activities). It would also be interesting to see how different people act differently in online synchronous activities compared to asynchronous online activities. We might find how much of this predisposition is ingrained in our personality and genes, and how much of it is based on learned/acquired attributes. It is difficult to assess how comfortable our student participants are ahead of time, so it may simply be a matter of forging ahead and then reflecting on the outcome to see how to make changes.