

Planning

Section 3 Learning Communities



Find out more at
bit.ly/AcademyLearningArchitecture

Planning

Integrating Social Spaces in Learning Design

When community building, we can ask some key questions:

1. What is the purpose of the community?

When designing social learning, it's easy to say "we need a learning community", but what exactly will it be for? You'll have determined an overall goal for your learning programme, but where does the learning community fit in? Why are you opening up a social space? Will it help knowledge transfer? Are you looking to hear divergent voices, to co-create a story?

Example: If you are designing a learning programme whose overall goal is to have learners adopt a specific set of behaviours or rules, for example in a first aid training, a learning community would not be essential for learners to attain your goal. There wouldn't be a need for discussion of the rules and sharing experiences of following the rules might not be valuable to learners. If your learning programme's overall goal is to train first aid trainers, a learning community would be more valuable. Learners gain from sharing their stories of experience for feedback that can be shared to contribute to a knowledge base.

2. What technology will you use?

In the Learning Architecture cards, we include systems for conversation, co-creation, storytelling, infrastructure, assessment and performance support. The choice of technology* (online or offline) that we use to support any particular community should relate to the purpose of the community: if we are looking more for knowledge transfer and direct assessment, then we need a system that gives us a core infrastructure, assessment tools, performance spaces and high consequence. If we are looking for a co-creative space, then we need more conversation, more storytelling, more room for rehearsal and lower consequence. Assemble the relevant pieces that work in the context you are designing for.

Definition: Technology: a collection of techniques, skills, methods and processes used in the production of goods or services or in the accomplishment of objectives. Social learning is not limited to learning through social media platforms. Depending on your context, technology could refer to techniques, processes or platforms, online or offline, that support the learning community.

3. How long will the community last?

It's likely that some communities will form for particular learning programmes, others may be ongoing. Even if the community continues to exist after your course, it's unlikely that you will have endless budget to support them, so it's worth planning from the start whether a community will be time bound or ongoing. If you plan for it to be ongoing, you may need to plan for it to transition to being self-supporting after a certain amount of time.

Example: It's possible to run a community formally for the period of time that a particular learning programme is in place, and then to consciously hand ownership over to the community itself, giving them the decision as to whether they wish to continue as a community of practice or close it down.

4. How will formal authority affect the community?

Online communities can exist beyond formal hierarchies. It is worth thinking about what type of authority will apply within a learning community. Will formal leaders – whether leaders in organisations or leaders within the formal course content – carry their status into the conversations they have within the community? If so, will people be expected to defer to those leaders? For creativity and sense making, it is useful if all participants are equal. To make sure this is understood, we may need to explicitly state that everyone has an equal voice. Depending on the group (and on the leaders who are being asked to give up their normal authority), it may be necessary to repeat this several times during the course. This is one of those times when the community manager needs to be firm in their own authority, so that a safe and useful space can be created for everyone.

5. What are the facilitating roles?

Engaged and productive learning communities depend on the emergence of community leaders to build momentum and sustain drive and cadence. When building a community for a specific purpose, around a learning programme, theme or organisational need, specific roles such as Community Management and Storytelling support the community. When a community becomes self-supporting, these roles emerge from within the community and the momentum can be sustained.

In coherent, bonded and purposeful learning communities you may find that social leaders (social storytellers) emerge. These are the people who typically have high social capital, an ability to survive and thrive within social spaces (on or offline, depending on the technology), and empathy and humility, to help others to succeed.

Example: To support a learning programme that encourages learners to share their experience stories as a source of case studies and local knowledge, someone experienced in storytelling might help others with the necessary skills as well as collect shared stories to build a co-created example or resource. To recognise emergent community leaders, you might invite the community to make nominations and reward those nominated, for example, with an opportunity to further refine, develop, practice and share their skill.

6. How will we safeguard the community?

The opportunity to bring people together does not make everybody equal: who will be responsible for looking out for those who are disempowered, disengaged, bullied, excluded, or whose voices are drowned out? Is that a role for a community manager? For social storytellers who emerge as leaders ('Social Leaders') in the community? You will need to have an active plan to safeguard the community, particularly for communities that cross cultural, legal, and ethical borders.

To nurture and develop the storytelling capability of the community, design a learning programme that accounts for a support structure. People may be disempowered or disenfranchised through access to technology, language skills, gender, sexuality, political views, religion, or disability.

- How will you help learners find their voice?
- Will you safeguard people with vulnerable voices?
- How will you communicate with support roles appropriate responses to generously, vulnerably shared stories?
- How will you help the learning community listen to and learn from stories?

Earning trust and fostering safe online spaces

- Why people join the community: Do they join it when they need to do some learning? Does it exist beyond learning programme? Does it have a specific theme or learning purpose?
 - When people join, how will learners introduce themselves? Why?
 - Will rules be imposed? Will there be opportunity for the community to be involved in writing the rules?
 - Clarity around who owns the conversation and the permanence of any stories that are shared
 - Transparency about who is watching and for what reason
 - Will we hear dissenting voices? How will we constructively model and engage with challenge and feedback?
-