

# **What are the conditions for and characteristics of effective online learning communities?**

**Australian Flexible Learning Framework Quick Guides series**

Based on the knowledge generated from the Australian Flexible Learning Framework projects and selected external literature, the Quick Guides series provides an introduction to key issues related to flexible and online delivery of Vocational Education and Training (VET).

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<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/community.pdf>

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## Scope

This guide is premised on the notion that ‘online communities’ are an increasingly important part of the way we will operate, as teachers, learners, and citizens of a networked world, and, the benefits we accept from these new ways of working.

This guide explores definitions and characteristics of online communities synthesised from the literature, summarises key success factors, and provides references to additional material for those who want to know more. It focuses in particular on online communities as part of teaching and learning, and on ‘communities of practice’ in vocational education and training (VET).

This guide does not extend to the important legal and regulatory issues which need to be addressed as part of setting up and managing online communities such as privacy, confidentiality, copyright, discrimination, defamation and harassment. For advice and sources on these issues visit the *Legal issues in flexible learning* website at <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/legal/> and the Quick Guide on privacy issues (Backroad Connections 2003a).

Effective facilitation (sometime called moderation) is arguably the single biggest factor in the success of an online community. See the separate Quick Guide on Effective Online Facilitation (Backroad Connections 2003b) for a more detailed exploration of this crucial role.

## Why it’s important

“Communities are about people and their interactions with each other. Thus communication is the heart of online communities” (Bowes, 2002, pg 1).

Communication has of course always been an intrinsic part of teaching and learning whether conducted face-to-face or at a distance. Online communities occur when the people communicating have common interest, purpose, or need to engage with each other and come together to do so.

Much of the focus in the first wave of online teaching was on ‘content development’ – the production of material for access by learners. However the last few years have seen a strong reassertion of the importance of communication and interaction as a core and essential part of online education. This has been driven by:

- The recognition of the importance of social interaction within the learning process.
- An increasing emphasis on a constructivist model of education, rather than the transmission of knowledge.
- A recognition that in the online world, information is pervasive and readily accessible, but that making sense of it is the real challenge.

We see teachers as ‘learners’ and recognise that *learning communities* and *communities of practice* have recognised benefits for teachers and practitioners.

*Online communities*, however, are not just important for teaching and learning they are important to the way we function – their importance to all aspects of the VET sector is driven by:

- **Recognition of the importance of collaboration**  
“... collaboration is an increasingly essential characteristic of the information economy, even in a fiercely competitive environment. Collaboration is no longer an alternative to competition. It is fast becoming a fundamental strategy through which organisations can achieve competitive advantage.” (Australian Flexible Learning Framework, p.8)

- **Increased need to establish effective working relationships**  
Closer ties between training organisations and industry, the emergence of a national (as opposed to state-based) training system, and more flexibility in the location of the delivery of training, including online, all increase the need for close working relationships that are not constrained by location.

Online is not separate to the physical world – in teaching, or the development of communities of practice – in reality hybrid models usually operate.

In summary, it is of increasing importance to understand how to utilise online communications to best effect to support our activities within the various communities in which we operate.

## Some definitions

Firstly, let us explore what is meant by ‘online community’ and some related concepts. The literature offers a variety of definitions, but for our purpose here we have selected the following to simply describe key terms frequently used when talking about ‘online communities’.

<b>Community</b>	A group of people who come together for a common purpose, interest or goal.
<b>Learning Community</b>	“...a group of individuals engaged intentionally and collectively in the transaction, or transformation of knowledge” (Kowch & Schwier 1997 quoted in Grozdanic & Weatherley 2001)
<b>Learning Network and Community Network</b>	Wheeler (2001) provides a useful summary table comparing attributes of these two types of initiatives. Community networks are typically grass roots initiatives focused on public access to the Internet and the development of local community content. Learning networks are typically government initiatives focused on the provision of formal and informal learning opportunities.
<b>Community of Practice</b>	“Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, quoted in Mitchell 2002)

**Community is a sense rather than a tangible entity – members have to feel they belong**, and have a shared faith that their needs will be met through their commitment to come together. (Brook & Oliver 2002, pg 2 quoting, in part, McMillan and Chavis).

“A community can be described through its many facets: people, time, place, boundaries (membership) and focus” (White 2003a).

## Types of Online Communities

### Purposes

Online communities are just about as diverse in purpose and character as the human beings they are made up of. Examples of purpose include:

- to support teaching and learning, activities (within or across subjects/units)
- to support teachers or students (for many purposes)

- to support and facilitate community partnerships for either the delivery of, or to provide access to, learning or knowledge sharing (e.g. to regional or rural locations or to particular communities as exemplified by the establishment of the Learning Network Trials in Victoria)
- to support and facilitate community skill development and the generation of local economic development
- to support special interest communities – e.g. to foster and support ‘communities of practice’ through the sharing of knowledge and practical experiences
- to facilitate business transactions.

## Attributes

There are many different dimensions on which an online community can be structured and no single approach. If you are establishing an online community the following may assist you in the planning phase to consider the dimensions and how you want your particular community to operate:

<b>Membership criteria</b>	Membership might be open to anyone interested, or might be restricted to a nominated group. If membership is open you may allow people to self-subscribe, or to apply to subscribe.
<b>Size</b>	An online community of an identified group with a specific task to complete (eg a single class) may be quite active and successful with only a dozen or so members. Less structured groups may require a ‘critical mass’ of members for discussion to be sustained over a period. In the context of an online conference, group size may be limited for various reasons including allowing participants to get to know one another, even though there might not be any practical technical limit on the number of participants.
<b>Support for subgroups</b>	Beyond a relatively small group, it may be important to have the capacity for sub-groups to form easily to discuss specific topics. However too much separation can confuse and can be counter-productive if for example people post the same message to a main and a sub-list – so the number of sub-groups needs careful consideration.
<b>Duration</b>	Some mailing lists and newsgroups can continue successfully for years. If you are expecting more intense participation (eg an online conference) a clear beginning and end may be important – quit while you’re ahead rather than fizzle out if you have a specific objective.
<b>Moderation</b>	Structured communities can have quite clear protocols for who is responsible for moderating discussion. Some communities can be self-managing, although there is almost always a core group of members who accept particular responsibility for the health of the group.
<b>Level of structure</b>	Some communities can be very structured, with specific participant roles such as moderator, mentor, buddy, subject matter expert. This can be very important in a fixed duration community. In other cases roles and structure may evolve over time.

**Outcomes** Outcomes can be quite specific, for example to complete a group assignment for assessment, or reach agreement on a technical standard by a deadline. Or, a general common interest may define the group and outcomes arise and vary over time.

## Communities of Practice

“Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, quoted in Mitchell 2002)

The Reframing the Future project funded by ANTA has done substantial research on this growing area of importance within the VET sector, supporting a number of pilot studies on ‘communities of practice’. The results of this research have been well documented. For further information see the Mitchell references below or visit the Reframing the Future website: <http://www.reframingthefuture.net/>

## Technologies to support online communities

A wide variety of technological platforms can be used to support online communities, including:

- Simple email messages can be used for a small or informal group.
- Mailing list software that manages distribution of email to a group and related functions such as subscription. Sometimes called listservs. Commonly used products include Majordomo and Lyris.
- Internet newsgroups (which can be either open and global or restricted to a single server with password protection).
- IRC (Internet Relay Chat) for real-time exchanges.
- Software written specifically for online forums, discussions and conferences (eg WebCrossing). Some have audio and/or video capability as well as text-based discussions.
- Learning management systems which incorporate their own in-built discussion facilities (eg, WebCT, Blackboard).

Each have different qualities and the choice of medium needs to be considered carefully giving consideration to purpose, the circumstance and skills of the group and other factors. Discussion on this is beyond the scope of this guide however a good starting point for exploring some of these issues is David Woolley’s **Conferencing on the Web** site <http://thinkofit.com/webconf/> which has a whole range of information including advice and articles on selecting software as well as information about the many free and commercial products available.

It may well be that you already have a software platform to support online discussion and community building as part of your organisation or state training authority.

There are a number of free services available within the VET Sector to support online communities. Two of these are:

- The **Australian Flexible Learning Community** – you can join existing discussions, or start new discussions.  
<http://learnscope.flexiblelearning.net.au/>

- **EdNA Online** – offers free services for establishing forums and mailing lists available to education and training organisations in Australia.  
<http://www.edna.edu.au>

## Key Success Factors

Examining the research literature, essential conditions reported for successful online communities mostly related to:

- establishing and planning
- creating a maintaining a community
- consideration of technical aspects
- dealing with (personal) challenges.

We have summarised some of the principal findings below.

## Establishment and planning

Some online communities emerge out of nowhere, are totally unplanned, and take off and blossom. But these are in the minority. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that careful planning is essential to the success of an online community, especially those that will operate for a limited duration and which set out to achieve specific objectives.

You need to:

- **Define the goal / purpose of the proposed community**  
Be clear on the reasons for establishing an online community. Make sure there is not an existing community with similar objectives which could be used.
- **Understand your user group**  
What skills and experience in using online technology do your proposed user group have? What do they require? Do you need to provide support or training? Will their access to computers, email and the web influence your choice of technical platform?
- **Define roles and expectations for key participants**  
Is it necessary or important to promote leadership from within the group to progress and manage the 'community'? If major activities are through online discussions is it necessary to moderate discussions? Will you have one or several moderators? Is there a defined role for 'visiting experts', mentors etc.? Are they, and participants, aware of what is expected of them, including response times? Are records to be kept and who will do this? What protocols will be established to maintain harmonious relationships?
- **Ensure adequate resourcing**  
Are adequate resources allocated to support the success of the community (time, people, technical support)?
- **Establish a plan to deal with technical issues**  
This includes choice of software and setting in place and documenting support arrangements.

*"If learners are aware that there is a contingency plan to keep the course going smoothly in the event of technology failure, then they will feel more secure and less stressed when a failure occurs." (Wheeler, Reynolds & Russell 2000).*

- **Achieve a critical mass of users**

If your community is not a predefined group (eg a class or project team) how will you ensure that sufficient members join to make your community viable? Beware of doing a lot of publicity and then having potential members turn away because there is an empty technical shell when they first visit. Populate your site with discussion starters and background information before you publicise it.

## Creating and maintaining a community

Steps in creating a community depend on the nature and purpose of the community being established.

Most communities, whether online or traditional, share a number of qualities and characteristics. For example, they're held together by distinct operating norms, members are distinguished by their formal and informal roles, trust must be built to ensure quality interactions, and a shared sense of purpose serves as the glue that bonds the community together.  
Soren Kaplan (2002)

Essential steps include:

- creating value
- facilitation
- establishing operating norms
- creating an environment of trust
- supporting individuality, and empowerment.

### Creating Value

Richard McDermott (2001) identifies the community challenge to “*create real value for community members and insure that the community shares cutting edge thinking, rather than sophisticated copying*”. He provides examples of the following steps:

- Get key thought leaders involved.
- Build personal relationships among community members.
- Develop an active passionate core group.
- Create forums for thinking together as well as systems for sharing information.

Although McDermott is writing of communities of practice in a business context, we can see parallels with teachers using guest speakers, using techniques for establishing good relationships amongst the student group that bring out the best in people, using group techniques to foster healthy and meaningful discussion, and ensuring the appropriate spaces are established for work.

### Facilitation

Effective facilitation (sometimes referred to as ‘moderation’) is said to be the single biggest factor in the success of an online community. We know this to be especially so when using online discussions within teaching and learning. See the separate

Quick Guide on *Effective Online Facilitation* (Backroad Connections 2003b) for a more detailed exploration of this crucial role.

McDermott (in the context of communities of practice which might be face-to-face, online or blended) makes important points about both the type of person required and the resourcing of the role:

We have found that successful community coordinators are well-respected members of the community. They are usually senior practitioners, but not usually the world leading experts. Since their primary role is linking people, not giving answers, being a leading expert can be a detriment to effectiveness. What's most important in a coordinator is that they are able to connect with community members on a human level. For a large, vibrant community, this role is often full time. It should at least be a substantial part of the coordinator's job. We have found that when it is less than a quarter of their job, coordinating the community falls off their plate.

Richard McDermott (2001)

### **Establishing operating norms**

A reoccurring finding in both online teaching and learning and community of practice literature was the need to establish operating norms.

*“Include guidelines for online and offline etiquette and obtain agreement on the behaviour that will lead to successful group and individual learning outcomes. For instance, ask each community member to log in three times per week and post one question and one response on the discussion board.”* (Kaplan 2002)

### **Creating an environment of trust**

Techniques for developing trust include involving all participants in the development of shared expectation and operating norms and ensuring that people have the opportunity to get know each other and feel comfortable communicating with each other. Techniques for making people feel comfortable go hand-in-hand with establishing the right environment through established protocols – safety and comfort are both essential elements.

### **Supporting individuality, and empowerment**

Kaplan (2002) identifies supporting individuality as an important part of creating community:

*“Provide a way for learners to create personal profiles that include photos and salient information to the topic. For example, a course on marketing might ask participants to identify their favourite innovative television commercial.”*

Brook and Oliver (2002) in reviewing the literature on virtual learning communities summarise a range of benefits and point out that the advantages are not limited to cognitive domain, but include also social and psychological benefits.

## **Technical aspects**

Technical aspects should not drive the ‘community’ considerations, but clearly they are important and contribute to the successful establishment and functioning of a community. These aspects include choosing technologies, technical support and accessibility.

Community members should spend more time learning about the topic than about how to use a given technology.  
(Kaplan 2002)

McDermott (2001) provides an important warning that the particular technical features of different communication systems are not the key determinants of use.

Ease of use is more about how the software integrates with people's daily work, the knowledge they need to share, the way they think about their community's domain and how they move about in it, than with specific features of the software itself.

Using systems that people are already comfortable with, including basic email, may be more successful than trying to introduce a more technically sophisticated system.

Having said that, there may be specific technical features that are important to the operation of your particular community.

You will need also to decide whether certain required functions need to be integrated into a single software system, or whether different features can be accessed as separate programs. (The latter is simpler, quicker and more reliable to set up but can be harder for users if it results in different interfaces for different tasks, having to login with different passwords for different functions and similar complexities.)

Specific functional areas that might be important include:

- **Synchronous discussion tools** (eg chat, instant messaging)
- **Document management systems** if an important part of your community is developing shared resources.
- **Groupware features** such as document sharing and collaborative writing, calendaring, polling, and archiving.
- **Personal profiles** where users can provide photos and information about themselves and which are automatically linked from messages posted by the user.
- **Content integration** if users need to be able to refer to reference documents or course material as part of the discussion.
- **Anonymous or pseudonym logins** for use in role-plays.
- **Reporting tools** for the teacher / moderator if you need to collect information about student participation for assessment or evaluation purposes.

Once the software is chosen and installed it is essential to ensure the provision of:

- appropriate user-friendly **documentation** that teaches as well as supports the user community.
- adequate, appropriate, and timely **technical support** (which will probably need be provided in a variety of ways – for example online help files, phone and email support)
- a secure and safe environment.

On this last point, publicly accessible webpage displays of online discussion are a popular source for harvesting email addresses to generate unsolicited bulk email (**spam**). This can be partly addressed by technical mean (eg not using mailto: fields to display email addresses) and is partly a policy and user education issue (eg users

might choose to set up a separate address on a free email service to use for a discussion that will be publicly archived).

## Personal challenges

Most of the above points are about the practical challenges for those establishing and managing online communities.

Personal challenges might include knowing how best to facilitate discussion and communicate online and developing the necessary skills in this regard; dealing with pragmatic issues such as time and adjusting to new work roles; and coming to grips with new ways of operating.

McDermott discusses personal challenges facing all participants in an online community. Identifying the need to “create real dialogue about cutting edge issues” which he argues needs to be built on relationships of trust, and might involve “openly discussing problems, sharing half-baked ideas [and] thinking aloud in public”. He recognises and warns that this may not come naturally to people.

An additional personal challenge for people participating in an online community is to commit the time necessary to contribute to and learn from the community. There is still a tendency to view online participation as not ‘real work’ and to give it a lower priority than face-to-face participation.

There are challenges in dealing with the human dimensions of groups. It is important to tend the health and well-being of the group, especially if it is a diverse group. This can be enormously challenging in any setting, and particularly within online environments if participants are new to online communications. Mitchell highlights some of these human intricacies....

“Communities of Practice are not havens of peace or unbounded goodwill: communities reflect all the strengths, weaknesses and complex interrelationships of their human members.”

Mitchell 2002 quoting Wenger, McDermott & Snyder

Dealing with personal challenges important factors appear to be:

- Ensuring you and the community participants have the necessary skills for communicating and working effectively online.
- Ensuring that time factors are considered and supported.
- Learning and refining techniques for managing diverse groups of people and assisting others to work effectively online too.
- Understanding and building in a tolerance factor recognising the fact that it takes time to establish a good working community and relationships.

## Suggested further reading

Backroad Connections Pty Ltd 2003a, *Privacy issues in online teaching and learning* (Version 1.00), Australian Flexible Learning Framework Quick Guides series, ANTA.  
<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/#privacy>

Backroad Connections Pty Ltd 2003b, *Effective Online Facilitation* (Version 1.01), Australian Flexible Learning Framework Quick Guides series, ANTA.  
<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/#facilitation>

What are the conditions for and characteristics of effective online learning communities?

- Brook, C & Oliver, R 2002, "Exploring the development of learning communities in online settings" in P. Barker & S. Rebelsky (eds.), *Proceedings of ED-MEDIA 2002, World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications*, AACE.  
<http://elrond.scam.ecu.edu.au/oliver/papers.htm>
- The paper discusses previous research on virtual learning communities that has explored the development of a sense of community and that suggests that participation has a range of benefits in the social and psychological, as well as the cognitive domain. It reports the results of a survey of 121 regular users of the LearnScope Virtual Learning Community which found that the users' sense of community related to the extent of their participation, but was not noticeably dependent on their previous experience with or access to technology.
- Coghlan, M 2001, *eModeration - Managing a New Language?* Paper presented at NET\*Working 2001 Conference.  
[http://www.chariot.net.au/~michaelc/nw2001/emod\\_newlang.htm](http://www.chariot.net.au/~michaelc/nw2001/emod_newlang.htm)
- Discusses the various communication options available to support online teaching and learning (synchronous and asynchronous). Looks at what constitutes successful online facilitation and examines theoretical models that attempt to make explicit e-moderation strategies. Provides links to a number of authoritative sites.
- Downes, S 2001, *Virtual Communities/Real People*, LearnScope Expert Spruik.  
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- Dibben, K 2003, *Making Online Communities Work*, education.au limited.  
[http://www.educationau.edu.au/papers/online\\_communities\\_educause.ppt](http://www.educationau.edu.au/papers/online_communities_educause.ppt)
- A PowerPoint presentation which provides a good overview of many of the issues involved in establishing and running an online community. Includes links to many Internet resources.
- Kaplan, S 2002, "Building Communities - Strategies for Collaborative Learning" in *Learning Circuits*, American Society for Training & Development.  
<http://www.learningcircuits.org/2002/aug2002/kaplan.html>
- This article presents a model that describes a number of practical applications for including community as part of a learning plan, and specific strategies for building learning-focused communities. Provides a useful definition of (a) e-learning community and (b) blended learning community. Has a list of design principles to use as a start point when creating e-learning or blended collaborative environments. These are divided into people approaches, process approaches, and technology approaches. Also lists tools that may support. Makes the case for learning communities as a way of sharing tacit knowledge.
- McDermott, R 2001, *Knowing in Community: 10 Critical Success Factors in Building Communities of Practice*, Community Intelligence Labs.  
<http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/knowning.shtml>
- Makes the case for Communities of Practice as the most effective way of accessing tacit knowledge in an organisation. Provides 10 success factors with practical examples of each. The success factors are divided into four key challenges; management challenge, community challenge, technical challenge, and personal challenge. Written from a business rather than educational perspective but provides a very practical introduction to both social and technical aspects of successful communities of practice (whether face-to-face, online or blended).
- Stuckey, B 2002, *Cut the Community Claptrap*, LearnScope Expert Spruik.  
<http://www.learnscope.anta.gov.au/learnscope/golearn.asp?Category=13&DocumentId=1875>
- Select the "Discuss this Article" link from the right to access the discussion that took place.
- Wheeler, L 2000, *Principles of Good Practice in Developing Online Communities for Learning Partnerships*, GlobalEd.com.  
<http://www.globaled.com/articles/WheelerLeone2000.pdf>
- A short article describing the practical experience of running RMIT Learning Partnerships. This is a learning network project at RMIT University which links Adult Community Education (ACE) providers in metropolitan regions of Melbourne as well as rural areas of Victoria. It is a community of practice based around training partnerships and the provision of professional development in online education.
- The article describes the key success factors identified by RMIT Learning Partnerships which include dealing with access issues, technical issues, the importance of training and professional development for network members, critical mass of resources and the challenge of long term sustainability of the Partnerships model. This work builds on the findings of the 1997 ANTA Online Networks in VET project.

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<http://www.learnlinks.com.au/docs/downloads/online.pdf>  
A comprehensive guide to teaching online. Includes sections on: skills required for online teaching; orientation program for learners; understanding learning needs and different learning styles; online teaching strategies; and contingency planning for technical problems.
- White, N 2002, *Dancing with Dragons*, LearnScope Expert Spruik.  
<http://www.learnscope.anta.gov.au/learnscope/golearn.asp?Category=13&DocumentId=2228>  
Select the "Discuss this Article" link from the right to access the discussion that took place.
- White, N 2003a, *Online Communities*, NET\*Working 2002 extra, ANTA.  
<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/nw2002/extras/commsonline.pdf>  
Summarises discussions on this topic in the NET\*Working 2002 Online conference. Looks at what makes a community click, why people connect, what online communities look like, the evolution of online communities, starting and supporting an online community, costs, and success factors. A practical account from the field and directly relevant to the VET teaching and learning community.
- White, N 2003b, *Communities of Practice: Learners connecting online*, NET\*Working 2002 extra, ANTA.  
<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/nw2002/extras/commssofpractice.pdf>  
Summarises some of the discussion that occurred amongst practitioners and others that participated in the NET\*Working 2002 online conference forums. Unpacks the notion of communities of practice relating it through tales and captured experiences. And, again, very relevant to the VET teaching and learning community.

## References

Additional useful references not included in *Suggested further reading* above.

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[http://reframingthefuture.net/publications/CoP\\_book.pdf](http://reframingthefuture.net/publications/CoP_book.pdf)
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