

Updating Learning Programmes IV: Active online participation

This is the fourth in a series of posts aimed at organisations and educational institutions who wish to overhaul existing learning programmes.

Active online participation

The early work of Etienne Wenger, Gilly Salmon and Nancy White* brought to the attention of educators interested in making use of online and remote technologies the benefits of online discussion and the formation of communities to promote learning. There are a number of ways to engage learners and encourage active participation in an online space. These may include:

1. Support interaction with peers.

One of the strongest areas for engagement, but one that is often overlooked by course designers, is a space that allows learners to offer mutual support and build solidarity in order to increase motivation and reduce feelings of isolation and attrition. This is not the same thing as “cafes” or ice-breaker areas, which are usually unstructured and unmoderated chaotic spaces that often go off-topic. This is a place for learners to feel safe letting their hair down, asking for emotional help and admitting to anxieties.

A good way to approach this is to:

- make the space exclusive to the learners on a particular course
- encourage access by different cohorts to allow for mentorship of newbies
- make the space private from the stifling presence of authorities
- identify enthusiasts from within the peer group to facilitate, moderate and perform admin tasks
- suggest initial topics for discussion to show learners what’s appropriate and to get things rolling

2. Opportunities for questions and feedback

Make sure there’s a place for learners to ask questions and get help and feedback from course tutors and administrators. This should be distinct from the peer support area, which is not monitored by authorities, by focusing more on factual and procedural issues. The key here is to make sure this area is monitored daily and questions are answered promptly. This is a good place to build a FAQ in order to avoid answering the same common questions over and over, but you do need to be patient with repetition.

3. Easy access

The online space needs to allow participation at any time and on any reasonably late-model computer with an internet connection. As the internet gets more and more ubiquitous, most courses in the west can make this a requirement for participation, but be aware of what access issues learner may have, including geographical limitation and disabilities, before setting requirements.

4. Embedded online expectations (for blended courses)

Blended learning is often challenged by being primarily (and historically) a traditional face-to-face course that has online activities added to it as a poor relation. To make the most of the online aspect of a blended learning course, the whole course needs to be overhauled and rebuilt according to which kind of activities are most appropriate for particular learning goals (please see the first post in this series: 10 First Principles). The online aspect needs to be as embedded in the course design as the original face-to-face, and the two can be linked through multi-faceted (problem-based) projects, lead-in and follow-up discussions, etc.

5. Knowledge built, shared, recorded

Last but not least, a great benefit to online interaction is that it not only provides a place to build and share knowledge, but also to record it as a resource, evidence and posterity. Learners receive validation by peers, and the chance for participants to bring in their own experience and share good practice from work-based learning can continually develop and challenge ideas. This provides opportunities to expand on course content, and the improving knowledge and deepening understanding turned into a shared resource and reference/knowledge bank. Developing a record of dialogue over time, discussions can be archived and the process of discussion available for future reference.

* Etienne Wenger, Social Learning theory and Communities of Practice: <http://www.ewenger.com>;
Gilly Salmon, E-Moderation: <http://www.atimod.com>; Nancy White (Full Circle), Facilitation and Community-building: <http://www.fullcirc.com/>



This is just a selection of things to think about. Please add your own suggestions for improving active online participation to my blog: <http://www.architela.com/blog>.