EdTech Leaders Online VoiceThread Transcript
What Makes an Effective Online Learning Community?
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Speaker #1: Kirsten Peterson, EdTech Leaders Online
Hello, everyone! This is Kirsten Peterson from the EdTech Leaders Online staff. My colleagues and I have long felt that the hallmark of the ETLO program is our learning community approach where participants engage in meaningful dialogue with each other around a common set of resources and activities. This model of online professional development is dependent on active leadership and direction from the course facilitator, who is a consistent presence in the course, guiding and extending the dialogue while introducing concepts and supporting the participants' learning process.

In order to foster and sustain a learning community in online professional development courses, ETLO staff have developed a collection of facilitation strategies. These strategies are practiced by ETLO facilitators and incorporated into the instruction of the facilitator training courses, thus creating a powerful modeling experience for learners.

In this VoiceThread, you will hear from former participants in the ETLO facilitator training who have since delivered online workshops in their local districts or states. These local facilitators will answer a series of questions in an effort to paint a broad picture of an effective online learning community.

Speaker #2: Harry Belch, Virginia
Greetings from Fairfax, Virginia! This is Harry Belch, online course designer and ETLO facilitator for about six years.   Facilitating and teaching are a lot alike, but differ in one significant philosophical aspect:

Teaching is a process that is *content* centered;
Facilitation is a process that is *people* centered.

By focusing on the participants, you allow *them* to embark on a more personal quest for knowledge. To this end, the facilitator must act as a guide, a director, a mentor, and a proponent. A facilitator is concerned with crediting and inspiring the group, instead of providing answers and being hailed as the expert. A facilitator encourages others to use their knowledge and gifts to advance their own learning, while building self-confidence that will empower the learner.

When you focus on each *participant*, especially those new to online learning, you have the opportunity provide them with a positive welcome to the growing online community. Therefore, it's important to communicate with your participants frequently. Respond to their correspondence as soon as possible. And even if you don't have an answer for them right away, let them know you will get back to them soon.

Contact participants who have fallen behind. Let them know they are missed and offer your help.

By making each participant the focus, a facilitator provides opportunities for personal and professional growth, and at the same time, presents a positive experience to the expanding online learning community.

Speaker #3: Shondolyn Richardson, Mississippi
Hi, this is Shondolyn Richardson from Columbus, Mississippi. As a facilitator, I think it's important to have a personal connection with my participants. So, I pay particular attention to what they tell me about themselves, their family, or situations that they may be going through. As simple as they may seem, Orientation Introductions provide vital information. I try to keep notes about important issues or highlights on each of my participants. That way, I can address them appropriately when needed. I make a point to respond to everyone personally on the Orientation Discussion board. I also utilize the Performance Dashboard regularly. I am always aware of who has been missing from the course and for how long they have been missing.

Correspondence with participants should be personal, outside of weekly, group emails. For example, if a person has been missing from the course over a week's time, I begin my email something like "Shondolyn, I've missed you online. Is there any way I can help you with anything?" Then, I will continue sharing information about missing posts or other important inquiries. Even if I have several participants to email about such things as missing assignments or absence from the course, I address each person by name and send individual emails to them. I want my participants to see me as a real person who is interested in their success and their life. This is how I create an effective online learning community.

Speaker #4: Stan Freeda, New Hampshire
Hi. My name is Stan Freeda and I am the NH e-Learning for Educators project coordinator and I also facilitate some of our OPEN NH courses. I have two pieces of advice that I'd like to share with you that might help you create an effective online community in your courses.

First, I would encourage you to **craft good questions that stimulate discussion and engagement**. Questions should involve higher order thinking so that they stimulate discussion. Think of Bloom's Taxonomy. Questions that ask about knowledge or understanding leave no room for discussion or development of concepts. Application level questions enable participants to share ideas about how they might use the content in their situation. But the most engaging discussions are those that ask participants to analyze, evaluate, or create ideas, based on the content they are learning. Upper level thought questions enable learners to delve deeper into the content and really understand its value and meaning in terms of their own teaching practices.

Next, I would recommend that you **reflect questions back to the group to engage further thought**. When participants ask questions, or are confused about a concept, it is very tempting to give them an answer. But remember that all thinking stops once an answer is given. Participants naturally think that the teacher knows all the answers and is looking for a specific one. But in our online model, discussions enrich the understanding and application of content. There are not necessarily right or wrong answers, especially with higher order questions. Reflect questions back to participants in your discussion forums. Offer advice on what they might think about or where they might find a solution, and pose further questions for them to think about, asking the class to share their thoughts on it.

Speaker #5: Amy Deason, Mississippi

Hello, my name is Amy Deason and I serve as an online facilitator for the Mississippi eLearning Initiative. The success of an effective online learning community begins with a successful facilitator. This facilitator should be able to present himself as supportive, reachable, and nurturing within the online environment. He must be organized and disciplined to attend to the needs of all learners. He must be innovative in applying differentiating instruction techniques within the environment that would engage all learners. This online educator should be skilled in administering effective assessments and incorporating those ongoing assessments to measure and monitor student progress. The facilitator must be able to issue timely and effective feedback while encouraging all learners to stay active and engaged. The facilitator must create a feeling of community that sets a warm and welcoming tone for learning. This is very important in developing an overall community that nurtures and promotes learning. All of these things should occur while maintaining overall consistency within the learning environment for program sustainability and success.

Speaker #6: Melissa Ferrell, Kentucky

Hi! I'm Melissa Ferrell from the Kentucky Dept of Education. Facilitating online contains the same components as face-to-face instruction such as the learning climate, content, instructional rigor and relevance, and classroom assessment and reflection. The major difference between facilitating online and teaching face-to-face is the learning climate. The most critical part of facilitation is fostering the learning climate through community building. The facilitator sets the tone for the learners to take the lead and direct the learning while the facilitator guides them with encouragement, prompting and cuing. Let them know that you are a partner with them in the learning process.

The two things that I try to focus on when building community is 1) what gets rewarded gets done and 2) help people like themselves better and they'll love you. You can do this by developing an interest in the participants' lives and increasing rapport through praise and humor. Make them feel at home by being creative and pleasant in your written, verbal and visual communication. Great facilitators create a climate in which the learners are motivated and excited about learning. We want participants to have a memorable and satisfying experience that brings them back to the virtual classroom so, treat them the way you would like to be treated.

Speaker #7: Aron Sterling, Virginia

Hi, this is Aron Sterling from the North TIER Partnership, a technology consortium located in Northern Virginia. As a facilitator I create an effective online learning community in a couple of ways. The first way is by encouraging creative introductions to the class, which include pictures and fun facts. After these introductions are made the facts and pictures are woven into a spreadsheet that can be printed out, creating a scrapbook so that when someone is replying to a classmate, it feels more like responding to someone in a live classroom. You can nuisance your comments based on an interest, such as using an analogy for growing if the person has a love of gardening.

A second way that this is accomplished inside of my online courses is by gradually releasing control of conversations. At the beginning of the course, I make sure to respond to everyone at least once. Through this modeling it shows that it is encouraged to make substantive responses and to ask questions that lead to conversations, even if they are not real-time. As the course progresses this aspect is returned back to where it

belongs, the class. It seems that by doing it this way the class is really able to sustain conversations even in weeks where my input is very limited. The modeling aspect, rather than just relying on a written description of expectations really makes a difference for the community. By the way, the questioning techniques that are modeled are based on my learning from the Cognitive Coaching method, so rather than modeling questions only about my reflections, the questions encourage the student posting to delve deeper into her or his own thinking.

The last way that I try to create effective online communities is by encouraging teamwork and creating opportunities within the class structure for folks to work together. Inside of the LMS that we use, Blackboard, there is the ability to create spaces for breakout groups. Writing group work into a course, even if it is for a week or two out of a six week course is difficult. So, questions are asked early and schedules are checked ahead of creating the groups, so when the actual group work comes there are fewer surprises. Participant's feedback has told me that many people appreciate the opportunity to work with someone else and some make strong connections with that colleague after the course is over.

So, basically, encouraging creative introductions, modeling conversations and encouraging and planning for teamwork are three ways that I use to create an effective online learning community.

Speaker #8: Paula Paul, Louisiana
Hello I am Paula Paul from Concordia Parish Schools in Louisiana. I have facilitated ETLO online courses for many years.

To illustrate what I see when I see an Effective Online Community, I will use a project I have been involved with for the past three years. It is the Louisiana State Department of Education's Teacher Leader program. Lalead is a year-long program designed for teachers to explore and enhance their leadership skills while moving toward attaining the Teacher Leader endorsement on their teaching certificates.

As part of the program the cohort of teachers complete two online graduate courses. They also attend team meetings in different locations across the state where they receive traditional face to face professional development.

An interesting thing I have observed about the laleads cohorts, is that whether the participants are meeting face to face or online, they pick up conversations right where they left off. When they meet face to face at the team meetings, they continue talking about and discussing topics, questions and ideas that began during the online course. On the other hand, when they are all back online, they continue discussion threads that actually began while standing in line for coffee and doughnuts or while having lunch.

The camaraderie that develops between the lalead participants flows seamlessly from online to face to face and back again. In addition to the serious content and stress of completing assignments on time, there is laughing, and good natured humor about experiences that happen to us as a community both online and during the face to face meetings.

I believe that an effective online learning community is one in which the facilitator has created a place where everyone is happy. Everyone knows the rules. Everyone feels

safe. Everyone is comfortable enough to voice their opinions and ask the important questions. The participants intuitively know when they should speak their mind publically online, or they should email the facilitator privately. They want to be led as opposed to "taught" and they want to feel like an essential part of the community. They return to the online discussion forums because they enjoy being together and learning from each other.

In a nutshell, I believe the group dynamics of an **effective** ONLINE learning community is exactly like those of any **effective** learning community – it just happens to be online.

Speaker #9: Sue Alkire, West Virginia
Hello, this is Sue Alkire from Hampshire County Schools in WV. I have been facilitating online workshops for about three years and when I see an effective online learning community, I observe certain common patterns of behavior.

First, I see people fully engaged in discussing the readings and activities with each other in depth. When the participants are really involved in the course it shows in the way they frequently respond back and forth to each other in a timely manner with thoughtful comments about the topics. They enter the discussion early in the session and regularly continue to take part in ongoing dialog. They do not merely meet the minimum involvement level, they exceed it.

Second, members of the group are not afraid to express personal opinions, but they relate them to the research and examples in the lessons. They freely explore and share various scenarios under which they can incorporate the lesson ideas into their own situations. They do not merely state agreement and then parrot what they have read - instead, they expand upon the ideas and speak from the heart. They realize early on that they can learn from one another's experiences as well as from the course curriculum.

Third, when a group has successfully jelled I can sense that they really care about each other from their actions. They genuinely contemplate and answer each others' questions with courteous consideration. If there is a disagreement, they can handle it tactfully and amicably because they have developed a mutual bond of respect. They actually take an interest in what their classmates are doing to the point that they watch out for one another, offer useful suggestions, and help locate and share extra resources. They even occasionally provide problem solving assistance to their comrades if the facilitator doesn't respond right away.

When I see that this feeling of unity has blossomed, I know that the group will feel comfortable and accepting of suggestions when they have to critique each other's projects. They will be able to collaborate, cooperate, and communicate in order to inspire one another to improve.

Speaker #10: Joyce Deer, Mississippi
Hi! This is Joyce Deer from the Mississippi Virtual Public School.

To build an online learning community I start with great communication. It is important to talk to each student daily, at least by email, in order to establish your rapport with them. Other good communication tools include chat, text, instant messaging, blogs and wikis.

Students must feel like they are part of the learning process from the very beginning. I make sure there are welcome messages so they know how they can contact me. In addition to all of these, I have threaded discussions to involve students so that they can enhance learning. I make sure all links in the course are relevant and unbroken. I like to have a chat session one or two times during the course so that the students can talk and ask questions and perhaps get to know each other a little better in a non-education setting.

If I ever teach more than one course in a series, I try to make sure that each course is similarly structured so that students are not confused going from course to course. This would include icons, titles and other features so that students would have continuity.

With online courses open to students all over the country and the world, this sharing can do more to increase learning than any other tool available to online teachers and should not be discounted as part of the learning process.

Community is important in all classrooms but even more so in classes that are only online.

Speaker #11: Glenn Kane, Mississippi
Greetings, this is Glenn Kane from the Mississippi Department of Education's On-line Teacher Professional Development. There are a couple of things that I do to create an effective on-line learning community. The first and most important is to make the participants feel comfortable. I ask the participants to respond to my very first email. After reading their initial postings to our Orientation, I respond to the email they first sent to me. In this response, I not only welcome them to the class, but I give them a personal response based upon their posting. I assure the "first timers" that I am here to help them and that there isn't a mistake that they can make that I haven't already.

The other thing that I do is constantly remind them that this professional development opportunity is a journey for all of us. Although I may be driving, I am still learning from each of them, and hopefully, they learn something from me that helps them improve their craft. This journey is all about self-improvement and teacher efficacy.

In this vein, I ask questions that are specifically directed toward them and the experiences they have shared. All this adds up to what I hope is a wonderful experience for each participant!

Speaker #12: Cris Crissman, North Carolina
Hi, I'm Cris Crissman and I like calling Raleigh, North Carolina, home.

I facilitate courses on developing new literacies. and my mantra has become Daniel Pink's "the future requires a different kind of person." To me it means that, in everything I do from the design of a course to my daily transactions with participants to the course wrap-up and evaluation, my goal is to get to know my participants well enough so I can help them that next step toward becoming the different kind of person they want to be. And I don't attempt this alone but I rally our colleagues so we're supporting each other as we step out there and take those risks. Clay Shirky speaks of "love, Internet-style" and how Web 2.0 tools enable us to share our passions and our causes to accomplish great things. I think that's the most important lesson I can facilitate.

One tip I have for doing this is have what I call a "tete a' tete" weekly in which everyone checks in with me to give me an update on how they're doing and how I can help. The Moodle assignment function works great for this. It's just another way of showing a little "love, Internet-style."