

Seven Rules of engagement

Encouraging people to join in

This chapter looks at practical ways of fostering participation in your online community. It covers:

- the difference between engagement and participation
- the importance of a single purpose
- the value of collaboration
- general tips on fostering engagement
- setting up a hotseat

Engagement, participation and deeper learning

Engagement and participation are different animals. Users engage with a search engine such as Google but they participate when they are actively encouraged to contribute to a web-based project, such as Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia, or the BBC's Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy site, h2g2.

Engagement is the connection of the online community with the largest number of participants possible. Participation is a two-way process that, in its most sublime form, enables users to express themselves.

Online communities, such as those that make up NCSL's talk2learn, take that process a step further. They actively foster a particular kind of **interaction** that deepens learning and creates understanding. **Hotseats or peer-to-peer** learning, in which participants both question and debate with experts as well as share their own experiences, are good examples of this deeper learning experience.

Toolkit

User participation

Learning messages

Participation enables users to express themselves.

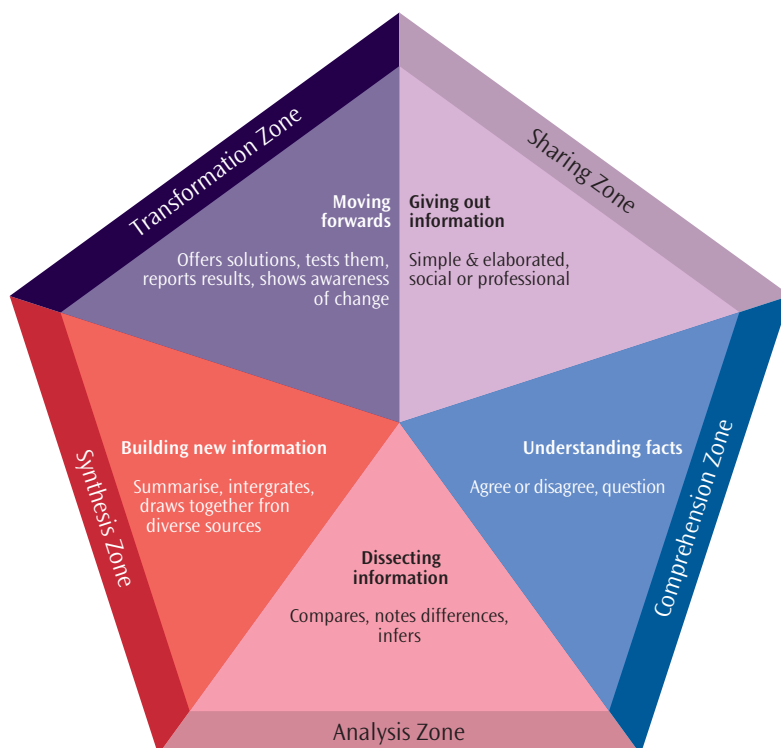
Collaboration is the key to unravelling complexity.

A clear purpose

There is no single path to community engagement. Look, for example, at the diversity of talk2learn's communities. They range from 105,000 members to just 10, and participation rates are equally varied. Some are portals for access to information while others, such as Policy in action, are there for consultation.

A number are led by course tutors and act as repositories for people's learning. Some, such as the mentoring communities attached to a specific activity, have a short lifespan but contribute greatly to people's learning. In some cases, online interaction has replaced face-to-face, email or telephone contact altogether to become the main method of communication for their members – **true community learning**.

Such a broad range of audiences requires a broad range of strategies but the key factor, and one common to all of the successful communities, is a clear and defined purpose. Without a strong, agreed rationale that participants embrace, communities will struggle to engage people and their content will be diluted.



Sharing Zone

How can I encourage participants to offer personal information - to create an atmosphere for sharing, and professional knowledge to enrich the dialogue?

*"Mark - sounds like a great holiday!
Could you tell me more about how you
have organised your department?"*

Comprehension Zone

How can I model making comments that agree or disagree with contributions (with reasons for this) and asking for more information towards understanding?

*"I agree Claire because this is a key
element in improving learning.
Was this common practice?"*

Analysis Zone

How can I model pulling out common threads from contributions and presenting them in the debate, and also pointing out differences between contributions?

*"The answer to the problems you both
describe has to be collaboration - though
your contexts are very different"*

Synthesis Zone

How can I model summarising a group of contributions?
How can I encourage participants to bring information (links) from outside this debate to enrich it?

*"A number of participants have
highlighted the issue of .. there are useful
resources at www.website.com"*

Transformation Zone

How can I encourage participants to think of how this information might lead to action, state this in the debate and report on any results?
How can I model commenting on learning (or change) that has come through this online interaction?

*"Have others tried a virtual debate
about good practice and elearning.
John's description has moved my
thinking forward"*

SEDDON-NCSL: Model of online learning behaviours

A climate of collaboration

Collaboration, rather than competition, between schools is increasingly seen as the way forward for education. Forward-thinking heads understand that they need to start to pool both their physical and mental talents at local level.

This collaboration and networking has been christened **'gift culture'** for its emphasis on sharing and exchanging knowledge and expertise. It is equally powerful in online environments and NCSL continues to invest in this area through the work of its Leadership Network.

Online collaboration in these communities has enabled leaders to share their resources, advice and skills with those who seek them and provided a pool of both experience and insight beyond which no one leader or even group of leaders could hope to gather in a lifetime.

Highlighting the **power of collaboration** is a key selling point for your online community and crucial to developing leaders' interest in its possibilities.

Practical tips for building participation

The secret of success for an online community is to encourage users to:

- acknowledge what they have gained as an audience
- donate learning of their own

Our experience in talk2learn suggests the following practical tips.

- Persuade members to agree to check online every day or at least several times a week. As a reminder, suggest they set the front page of your community as their home page.
- Place all **working documents** on the site, such as forms, funding or bid documents or guidance and calendars, in fact all the things that people need to access for their work.
- Email reminders to people and keep repeating instructions for accessing your community.
- Use **newsletters** to whet appetites about forthcoming forums and other events and direct them to the website for more details.
- Make sure the community facilitators and champions mention the site at all meetings, perhaps by providing a short and enthusiastic report on what's new.
- Give **postcards** to key people with their user names on and the password help desk.
- Try a conversation or debate that is unthreatening. Some people may feel intimidated by educational debate but may be happy to say what they are reading.
- Hold a competition, for best photograph, for example.
- Ask those who lead on certain subjects to run question and answer items on the site relating to their area.
- Approach as wide an audience as possible to contribute and create articles.

What happens in talk2learn?

The table on the following page shows some ways in which talk2learn stimulates participation and the outcomes.

Activity	Community tools	Outcomes
Ask and answer questions	Forums, chat and help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve member knowledge • Personalise learning opportunities
Discuss	Forums (debate, conversation, discussion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and challenge ideas • Grow understanding
Ask experts	Hotseat forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand, refresh and personalise content
Collaboration	Shared documents and resources, live chat, forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grow community knowledge and resources • Action research
Share or take resources	File stores, (lists, documents, website addresses), community pages. Secure membership or content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquisition of resources • Time-saving • Secure information store
Validation and visibility	Members' list, member pages, personal icons, lists of people who have read forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved sense of value
Delicate or sensitive discussions	Brainstorm (anonymous). Secure membership and content, closed communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom to discuss difficult or sensitive issues
Communication	Notes, news, instant messenger, email	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push information • Update content
Reflection	Community visit, journey over time in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepen understanding • Learning

Running a hotseat

As regular users of talk2learn will know, a hotseat is a virtual discussion area where a guest expert and online participants can debate vital issues through the posting of questions and answers. This has potential in a school environment, enabling access to a wide range of experts to support student and staff learning.

Hotseat guests in talk2learn have included education ministers, senior members of DfES, educationalists, researchers and all types of school and business leaders.

Each guest is asked to provide a short **think piece**, a 250-word stimulus to the discussion that needs to provide background information, along with three open-ended questions designed to stimulate discussion. Increasingly NCSL is also using videos and audio to present the think piece. A biography and photograph of the guest is usually put on their home page.

A short introductory paragraph for the hotseat, a biography and photograph of the host, the three stimulus questions and links to the think piece are inserted into the header of the hotseat forum. This is the part seen when the forum is placed on a page to encourage the user to take part.

It is important to publicise the hotseat forum so that initial contributions can be made quickly. One problem is often the reluctance to be the first to ask a question, but once the ice is broken, the questions flow freely. talk2learn allows a hotseat guest to respond to questions at a time best suited to them. We have had guests contributing from Australia, Canada and the USA although the majority of posts come from school leaders in England.

Toolkit

Introduction

resources

Facilitator competencies

The **tone of the response** to a question is important. Showing that a contribution is valued and also mentioning the contributor by name creates a good atmosphere. Similarly, a guest asking a supplementary question as part of a response is a positive way of re-engaging with a contributor.

It is important that hotseat guests should try to visit regularly. If possible, a response to a question should be made within 48 hours. Should this prove impossible, a holding statement can be placed by the guest or an e-learning facilitator, allowing other contributions to continue.

At the end of the hotseat's allocated time, it will usually be **archived** within the online community that established it, along with a short, introductory summary.

It is important to remember that the people who contribute to a hotseat are not the only ones who benefit. There are many people who, while not actively contributing, learn greatly from what they read. And the hotseat guest may gain just as much from the discussion as those who ask a question or raise an issue.

Underpinning the success of hotseat is the role of the facilitators. The facilitator works to support the hotseat guest, and those participating in the activity. At the end of the hotseat, a facilitator will typically write a summary, send thank you notes to participants and evaluate the impact of the hotseat.

For further information, references and guidance, go to www.ncsl.org.uk/communities.