Nine

Made to measure

Evaluating the impact of your community

Successful online communities generate a buzz that comes from visitors and contributors alike. This chapter explores some of the ways we have tried to measure this interest and impact. It looks at:

- who needs data and why
- different ways of measuring community activity
- meaningful versus meaningless data

Communities such as NCSL's talk2learn offer school leaders a wonderful opportunity for communication and collaboration but to know whether that potential translates into learning, we need to collect **data** and share it with all the community stakeholders.

Different people need different information for different reasons. At the community level, for example, facilitators of learning need to know what impact the items being created are having and what's happening in schools as a result of the issues raised. Middle managers need data for quality assurance and, as they are accountable to senior management, will rely on data as evidence of activity. Senior managers, meanwhile, need a **broad picture** of activity so they can see whether their investment is paying dividends.

The aim of collecting and disseminating information is to increase the learning that takes place within the community by continually reviewing and improving its content and structure.

Learning messages

Measuring activity depends on more than a head-count.

Quantitative data counts – so does qualitative.

What to measure?

In an ideal world, we could quantify the level of buzz in a community by examining:

- which members are visiting the community
- how many are contributing
- how often they come back
- the level of **interaction** between contributors
- what level of learning and depth of engagement their contributions show
- how many people are reading contributions and the benefit they gain
- the impact of people's **participation** on their work and the young people they work with (see Seddon-NCSL Five Zone Model on page 46)

In the real world we don't have that mass of statistics and nor would we have the time to analyse them. You will need to find out what statistics your software can provide.

In talk2learn, data is available on:

- membership
- visits
- unique visitors
- contributions
- individual contributions

Data can be extracted for the online community as a whole or for individual pages or items such as forums. The time period the data covers can also be set. Of course, it is important to strike a **balance** between the effort involved in collecting and analysing the data and the benefit that the information gives – in other words, don't let number-crunching become an end in itself.

However, the holy grail of a single measure of success, formed by combining the available measures, continues to be elusive. Below are some examples of the information we do produce, graded from low to high for the effort taken to create it and low to high for the usefulness of the result. You can see examples of the graphs and charts themselves online at www.ncsl.org.uk/communities.

Usefulness	Effort: Low	Effort: Medium	Effort: High
High	Visitors and contributions data from system reports	Management summary showing change since previous month. Participation and contribution percentages. Headline figures for senior management	
Medium	Monthly line graphs inform facilitators about the progress of their community		
Low		Graphs comparing cohorts analysing the percentage of members that visit and percentage of visitors that contribute	Weekly graph of visits and contributions, annotated to show activities and levels of learning

How loud should the buzz be?

As a rule of thumb, a good level of buzz is generated if, in one month, for a large community of practice (more than 50,000 members):

- 10 per cent of members visit
- 15 per cent of visitors contribute
- each contributor leaves between two and three contributions

and for a smaller community set up to meet a need or complete a project:

- 75 per cent of members visit
- 50 per cent of visitors contribute
- each contributor leaves between four and five contributions

and for a learning group where all participants are expected to visit as part of the course:

- 100 per cent of members visit
- 100 per cent of visitors contribute
- each contributor leaves more than five contributions

Understanding the data

Remember that figures produced by **software developers** are not always those that a manager and teacher or facilitator would find most useful. For example, the first set of figures produced for us returned the number of people using the community when the report was run, rather than the number of community members.

Understanding exactly what is meant by a visit is not straightforward. The terms 'hit', 'visit' and 'page impression' are all used to measure the number of visits, but in different ways. A **hit-counter** increases by one every time a page is displayed on the screen. Visits are increased when an item is first entered. But these are not standard across all software systems and it makes comparison between different systems difficult. Similarly, some systems count contributions from the creators of activities while others do not.

Even after the data has been produced, there are pitfalls. In our data, for example, unique visitors to different communities or in different months cannot be neatly quantified.

Shooting the messenger

When the figures are down compared with the previous month's or similar communities, people are inclined to blame the data. This is compounded if people feel they are being judged in any way. You need instead to examine possible reasons for the drop and longer term patterns, such as the rises and falls in community activity across the school year.

Different communities behave in different ways and even trying to categorise communities can be a minefield. Similarly, communities **behave differently** at different times of the year. The aim of the statistics is to build up a unique picture of individual communities to enable like-for-like comparisons to be made.

The importance of qualitative data

Is it better to have one contribution that moves a debate forward and provides **valuable insights** into a fellow participant's learning or to have a hundred low-level, 'my name is …' contributions? The latter look better in reports, but the former will, we hope, have more impact in terms of learning and online behaviour.

We do, of course, need both meaningful contributions and high levels of participation. People engaging at a higher level of learning give the community value.

Impact on individuals

Toolkit

The theory

It is important to try to understand the impact of a particular discussion item on the knowledge, skills and understanding of individual participants. At NCSL, the **SEDDON-NCSL: Model of online learning behaviours (see page 46)** (learning behaviours taxonomy) has been used by participants and tutors to review their contributions to online discussions.

The model is based on long-term research into online interactions. It is not hierarchical, as all types of contributions are valuable in knowledge creation. Model is accompanied by questions and can be seen in full in the e-learning facilitators toolkit.

Finally

Measuring the volume of the buzz contributes to the development and growth of our communities and to the learning that takes place within them but only when it is done in a **meaningful** way.

Counting heads tells you very little by itself.

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