

Online Community for Teachers of English Language Learners

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Overview

This report provides recommendations for developing an online community for the *Understanding Language* (UL) initiative. These recommendations are based on published research into online communities, on practical experience working with similar projects, and on conversations with the leaders of UL. The goal and value of such a community would be to provide additional opportunities for educators to come together around and contribute to the UL initiative in its efforts to improve education for all students.

Centrally, we recommend that the project take the approach of *cultivating* community among educators rather than attempting to plan all its features in advance. Once the UL working groups develop an initial set of resources for the website, the project should convene discussions among potential community members and staff, developing a set of shared goals and activities for the community. What could an online community do that would supplement or extend the resources and further the goals of UL? The goals and activities should be motivating to potential community members, and by working toward them, members should both learn and make a contribution.

Technology development should begin with a few flexible tools such as listservs, but in general, it should serve community goals and grow as the expressed needs of the community grow. What tools would help advance the community's work? Throughout this process, staff members cultivating community and monitoring its health should do so along four dimensions: *remuneration, influence, belonging, and significance* (Howard, 2010).

What is a Community?

The word *community* can be used in a variety of often conflicting ways (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001), and likewise *online community* may call to mind different images for different people. Some use it to refer to any social elements on the web, including limited forms of participation like comment sections below news articles. Others may think of social networks like Facebook as online communities. In the scholarship on the subject however, *community* refers to something more coherent – not a web of linked profiles but a “collective whole” (Barab and Duffy, 2000) with, if not sharp boundaries, then at least a center and periphery. By Barab and Duffy's definition, a community has a shared cosmology, joint goals, and a significant history, and it is constantly reproducing itself. It may be an overstatement to say that this project aspires to define a cosmology. Nevertheless, the point is not to quibble over definitions but to agree that the goal of UL is to create and extend a shared set of beliefs and resources. Thus, the community we discuss here is of the stronger sort.¹

¹ Short of developing this sort of strong community, the initiative can take limited steps– such as putting comment sections below resources, moderating them, and offering professional development courses– but to smaller effect. These are unlikely to develop into an enduring, self-perpetuating community.

Cultivating Community?

The UL steering committee and working groups have spent many hours discussing and building consensus about central ideas for the initiative. They continue to work at developing sample resources. These will set the tone for any community that arises. But if these are to be taken up in by the community in a meaningful way, they cannot be imposed from above, and although foresight is beneficial, the community cannot be planned in advance. That is, the community is built among members engaged in implementing the ideas in their practice, discussing them, and developing a shared sense of what they can do together to advance the shared goals of the community and project. Instead of design or planning, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) suggest that a more appropriate metaphor is *cultivation*. In cultivating online community, UL can plant seeds, water the ones that take, watch for unexpected shoots, weed out bad ideas, and nurture the good ones.

This basic point about not over-planning is seconded by other educational researchers, who have converged on the idea that development of online learning communities should “not begin with the virtual environment but with locating existing functioning groups and determining how to best use technological infrastructures to support their continued growth” (Barab, Kling, and Gray, 2004, p. 9; Kling and Courtright, 2004; Schlager and Fusco, 2004). UL can profit from this insight in several ways. First, if we attempt to design tools and structures for a community that does not yet exist, they will likely go unused. We should allow that larger community to take shape, facilitating its development, whether in the setting of goals or facing the challenges of implementation. The project should then invest in developing tools and community that support its pursuit of those goals. Second, UL plans to build on professional development provided in schools and should work to support these existing communities and knit them together into a larger one.

Basic Recommendations

At the moment, the project’s priority is to develop a consensus among working groups and to develop resources. Online community is a lower priority, and as noted above it would be difficult to plan in advance, even more so with other elements in flux. During this time, the project should choose technologies that can be expanded for community when the time comes, such as the Drupal content management system already in use for the UL website. We should also begin to build mailing lists of collaborators and interested parties. Once the working groups have settled on core ideas and are nearing completion of a set of resources for the website, UL should build basic tools to facilitate conversation, especially one or more listservs. Using these tools, project staff should convene prospective community members (professional developers or teachers using the resources) and facilitate a discussion about the existing resources and what a community might do to extend them. As the community converges on a set of shared goals and activities, the project can allocate funds for whatever sorts of technology or organizational development will further them. It is difficult to say now what those projects might be, and to do so would be to short circuit necessary conversations. Thus, the remainder of this document does not provide a blueprint for community but ideas for cultivating it.

Community Member Experience: The RIBS Framework

As the community develops and works towards goals, staff members should monitor its health and respond accordingly. According to Howard’s (2010) “RIBS Heuristic,” community health can be gauged in terms of four dimensions members’ feelings: remuneration, influence, belonging, and

significance. Below, we briefly describe the four points of the heuristic and provide practical suggestions for fostering them. These have been culled mostly from Howard except where otherwise noted, but we have selected points and presented them so as to be most helpful to UL. These do not represent a step-by-step plan. Rather, when the time comes to start a community, project staff can choose from and adapt these ideas to fit the situation. Staff may also refer directly to Howard's text, which is sound, accessible, and useful.

Remuneration

Simply put, remuneration is defined as the benefit members receive from being part of a group. This may include knowledge transfer or even outright payment, but Howard (2010) emphasizes that "the key to long-term success is remembering that the most important remuneration you have to offer is the *experience* of socially constructing meaning" (43). UL could provide members with several forms of remuneration:

- Resources to use in the classroom.
- Advice from skilled, like-minded practitioners.
- Learning about linguistic approaches to content in a more transformative way.
- Positive experiences and recognition in interaction with community members.

Practical Suggestions for Remuneration

Seed the discussion. Ask pressing, relevant questions to provoke lively discussions. Keep the tone civil but allow some conflict, which encourages readership and participation. This is a fine line to walk, and controversy will be more acceptable on some topics than others. Encourage disagreement where it seems constructive and likely to draw people into the conversation.

Hire contributors. To seed and sustain discussion, it is sometimes necessary to hire contributors. If possible, participants in professional development should be remunerated in ways other than cash payment. If people feel they are receiving payment in direct exchange for their work, they may be less likely to continue participating once the incentive is removed. In lieu of payment, we might provide professional development credit, resources for their classroom, meals, support, etc.

Have regular events. The UL webinar series is a good start toward a consistent monthly event to create familiarity, and provoke discussion. We could also send organization emails on the same day every week or designate a day to share successes, for example, or a "Friday Fun Day" as a break from more serious discussion.

Promote mentorship. To convert new members into real contributors, rather than becoming mere "lurkers," UL can ask experienced members to mentor new ones. A new member would be assigned a mentor who would send them occasional private messages over the first 30 days, demystifying the activities of the community, building a personal connection, and encouraging the new member to contribute.

Influence

Members of the community should feel like they have some influence over its direction. In this regard, UL faces a challenge, given that the project will largely be driven by experts on language and the subject areas. When community development begins, the project should

carve out opportunities for members to exercise voice. For example, teachers who have used our materials are especially well-positioned to identify shortcomings and useful next steps. This is most likely to be effective if they are treated (and credited) like collaborators rather than as customers or clients.

Practical Suggestions for Influence

Different needs. Community members can be categorized in several ways. In Kim's (2000) hierarchical five-level system, they are called *visitors*, *novices*, *regulars*, *leaders*, and *elders*. Other schemes label them as *creators*, *critics*, *spectators*, etc. Some types of members (generally, veterans and heavy contributors) need to feel more influence. New members are usually less concerned with influence but require more help and immediate feedback. All types of members are important, and UL should be aware of their varying needs (for more, see Howard, 2010, pp. 85-93).

Committees. Ask established contributors to serve on an advisory council or welcoming committee. The latter allows them to feel like insiders while also assisting prospective members.

Application. Ask prospective members to submit a simple application (a web form with 3 or 4 questions) stating why they would like to join and what they could contribute to the community. This establishes an expectation of contribution and helps veterans invest more time in the most committed applicants.

Occasional Surveys. Send quick surveys, which allow members to express concerns and can help address small complaints before they become larger.

"Visitor's Center." Set up a web page where prospective members can find basic information on the community, how to participate and why, as well as what opportunities are available.

Belonging

Many people participate in communities because it gives them a sense of belonging – of membership and connectedness.

Practical Suggestions for Belonging

Ceremonies. The community should create regularly recurring events, celebrating collective accomplishments and recognizing the advancement of members to new leadership roles within the group.

Initiation rituals. These can promote group solidarity through shared experience. If we offer a professional development course, it can serve as a sort of initiation ritual. If our community will include teachers from the profession at large, we should consider ways to provide them with a similar, abbreviated initiation.

Personal writing style. Community developers will need to calibrate the tone of their writing. Bacon (2009, p.82) warns community builders, "Don't write like an institution." There will be times when a press release or administrative tone will be appropriate but most communications within a community should sound personal rather than official. Err on the side of brevity and

write as if talking to someone nearby, using “I” and “you” statements, and balancing seriousness, humor, wit, frankness, and slight self-deprecation (ibid., pp. 85-87).

Organizational mythologies. Use anecdotes or stories to explain, for example, where the organization came from (an origin myth) and what it is doing (a vision story). Myths can also identify an enemy or discourage unwanted behaviors, but this sort of negative myth should be used judiciously.

Personal mythologies. A community can also encourage members to tell and share their personal stories or ‘myths’. As with the testimony of an Alcoholics Anonymous member, re-narration can strengthen connection to the community, encourage desired behaviors, and encourage others to revise their own personal stories.

Visual identity. Consistent use of a logo and color scheme will help community members feel they are in a distinct place. A set of symbols could be developed, consistent with the overall look and feel, to represent member roles or levels of participation.

Significance

Members are most likely to return to a community that is recognized as a “go-to place” in its field (Howard, 2010, p. 168). UL has many advantages in establishing this reputation including its affiliation with Stanford and the involvement of numerous respected members of the field. It is worth considering though whether the people UL seeks to draw into a community, including teachers and professional developers, will recognize the names of its leaders, who may be better known in academic and administrative circles. If this is the case, UL may want to reach out to “influentials” whom the target community members will recognize, or to employ other methods for building a sense of significance.

Practical Suggestions for Significance

Vision Narrative. Stories can be used to convey the project’s vision. What is the problem? What is UL’s vision? How will we achieve it?

Feeling of “Specialness.” Howard (2010) suggests developing significance by cultivating a certain element of exclusivity. This may be in tension with UL’s goal of providing widely accessible resources. If there is also a concern that UL could be seen as an ivory tower, then exclusivity may not be the most appropriate public posture. UL should, however, make members feel that they are a part of something special. We might take advantage of some natural points of exclusivity (e.g., limited capacity in PD courses, a need to expand gradually, and of course the Stanford name), taking care to seem special but not arrogant.

Publicize Accomplishments. UL can encourage members to post biographies listing their accomplishments. By celebrating members’ successes, we can recognize them while also reinforcing the sense that the community is a place for successful people.

Social Media. UL could establish a presence in social media such as blogging, Facebook, and Twitter while also reaching out to opinion makers with large social media followings.

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