



Report
Participation in FAO Online Communities workshop

Workshop with a Difference:
The Virtual Workshop on Introduction to online Communities

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Report content:

1. Introduction	p. 1
2. Resources in the Moodle space	p. 1
3. Pre-conference week	p. 2
4. Assignments	p. 3
5. IMARK e-Learning lessons	p. 3
6. Discussions	p. 4
7. Workshop experience	p. 4
8. Reflection as workshop participants	p. 5
a. Evaluation of other online communities	p. 5
b. On the Treasure Hunt game	p. 5
c. On Learning Logs	p. 5
d. On Moodle	p. 6
9. What worked well in the Virtual Workshop	p. 6
10. More information	p. 7

Introduction

The Virtual Workshop on Introduction to Communities was organised by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) for potential and present Online Community facilitators. Facilitators for the workshop were Luca Servo of the FAO, based in Rome, and Nancy White of Full Circle Associates, based in Seattle, USA.

Participants, by way of learners, were twenty-six (26) and drawn from all over the world. A majority of participants were based in Rome. Clara was the only participant currently based in Africa. There were two participants based Asia, a participant from Brazil and another from Belgium.

We were sponsored to participate in the virtual workshop by the International Institute for Communication Development (IICD), in line with efforts to better the activities of the Community of itrainonline-associated trainers (*itrainers*), a community in which we have been acting as facilitators with no formal training (see <http://www.dgroups.org/groups/itrainers>).

The workshop used the Moodle Open Source course management system to facilitate instruction and learning.

Resources in the Moodle Space

1. Community Café

This was a place for us to introduce ourselves, and for the more informal and off-topic conversations. There were also spaces for Help, Questions and Suggestions and the Workshop Notice Board. The Notice Board was where the facilitators posted all assignments, updates and information about the workshop. Although other resources could

be subscribed optionally (whereby we received an email announcement each time there was a new post in that resource), this resource by default had everybody subscribed.

2. Purpose Checklist Wiki

The Purpose Checklist helped us to start thinking about and designing our own groups. A series of wiki spaces which we could name and use to organize and record your thoughts about your groups were created. We, claimed one and named it the "The Community of Trainers (*itrainers*)".

3. Learning Logs

The learning Logs was place for reflection, gathering workshop ideas, and smaller conversations between ourselves. It was a place to help us 'make sense' of what we were learning.

4. Case Studies Wiki

This was a collection of some Online Community websites from which we would later select one for use in our evaluation of Online Communities

5. 'Cybrary'

This was a collection of some additional resources that were of use in our work; designing, facilitating and evaluating online groups and networks. As you click into these files - don't worry. The material was downloadable.

6. Glossary

Our glossary included terms we use online that may or may not be familiar from our offline work. Participants were given the right to add new entries. In addition to this, individual weeks had specific resources.

Pre Conference Week

As participating individuals we were encouraged to log into the moodle space created for the workshop to acquaint ourselves with its functionalities and features. We introduced ourselves to everybody else in the Community Cafe and that started the ball rolling. Other tools that participants were introduced to were the Learning Profile survey using Survey Monkey. In this participants answered various questions pertaining to them selves upon which Survey Monkey returned results on the individual's learning styles and thought processes. Participants were urged to share the results in their Learning Log.

During the preparation week workshop agenda and tips were also made available to participants. The pre-conference week activities in our opinion made potential participants feel at ease and feel recognised. This was probably due to Nancy's and Luca's response to every post made by participants. It obviously added to our confidence that we were not out of place and our thoughts did matter.

Activities Per week: participants participated in activities that gave them an insight into online community tools. Activities were in the form of assignments, discussions, IMARK learning lessons and the Friday live meetings via Elluminate¹.

¹ Elluminate is a web-conferencing e-Learning Solution, see <http://www.illuminate.com/>

Assignments

All participants were encouraged to participate in the weekly assignments. Three assignments were available according to the number of weeks of the workshop.

Assignment 1: **Visit and evaluate another network**

As part of this assignment, participants visited other online networks and assessed them in terms of purpose, operations and activities. We visited some suggested existing communities where, based on a Purpose Checklist made available in the moodle space. Participants had the option to do the evaluation in teams or as individuals.

The outcome of the evaluation was submitted by way of claiming one of a few wiki spaces provided in the moodle space. Ken Kubuga evaluated the Africa Source II list whilst Ms Clare Sempebwa evaluated the social software research community.

Assignment 2: **Tool Treasure Hunt** or **Technology training**

This assignment which came in the second week offered participants two choices:

Option 1: for those who wanted to explore tools and technology used in online communities, the "Tool Treasure Hunt" was available. In this a quick look at a few technologies and how they can be of use was taken. Both of us took this option.

Option 2: was meant for those participants who had already had the tools set and would want to focus on training community members on how to use the technology. The Assignment was to create a training resource for the group and then share it in the Discussion Forum in the Moodle space.

Prizes After participation in option 1 where we got the experience of using some Web 2.0 tools (blogs, del.icio.us, wikis and 'social bookmarking' (using del.icio.us)) we, with a few other participants, received an online "chocolate treat" in addition to a citation which will be included in the certificate of participation to be mailed to participants.

Assignment 3: **Community engagement strategy**

Emphasis was placed on facilitation, particularly how to engage people in online groups. One important thing was the ability of the workshop to highlight differences between face-to-face and online communities. The differences were looked at particularly in relation to how to make the task of facilitating online an easier and more productive task.

Participants were then encouraged to develop two different engagement activities for their groups or networks after the week's lessons. The activities were to be posted in the week's Discussion forum.

IMARK e-learning lessons

These were to the core of the workshop's activities. Participants read them at their own convenience. A significant thing was the tying of time to each lesson; average time required to read through was indicated against each lesson's title. This in our opinion was an encouragement to the readers to read as it made it easy to budget time. Over the three weeks a total of 12 IMARK lesson were tackled in increasing numbers as shown below.

- Week 1: 3 IMARK e-learning lessons
Skills and resources for an online community Assessing the user's needs Barriers to electronic networking
- Week 2: 4 IMARK e-learning lessons
The emphasis of these lessons was on the exploration of tools, however, those participants who did not need to explore these were encouraged to focus on the first and last lessons in the order below. • Introducing online communication in your work • Overview of technical options • Making the right technical choices • Training for a successful online community
- Week 3: 5 IMARK e-learning lessons
The role of the facilitator; Face-to-face and online facilitation; Developing your online community culture; Preparing and organizing online discussions; Marketing your online community

Discussions

Alongside the lessons and assignments various discussions took place concurrently. These were not as structured although the topics for discussion were proposed by the facilitators. In all three discussions took place, each per week.

Discussion 1: *Getting Started with Online Communities*

In this discussion, we looked at the big picture of online groups and communities. Attention was paid to among other things; • How and why are they useful in our work? • Defining the PURPOSE of our groups... • Understanding who might participate and identifying their needs.

Discussion 2: *Identifying activities and picking tools*

This discussion took us into the more of the practical "how-to's" for our online groups. A clear outcome was the identification of the fact that there is usually a high temptation to just look at tools when it comes to online communities. The discussions mainly gave the feature lists of such tools. The treasure hunt earlier mentioned was boarded by this discussion. One of the activities undertaken by participants was the listing of activities that would be undertaken by their groups and tools necessary to ensure things would be properly done.

Discussion 3: *How we encourage participation and engagement*

This discussion was based on the premises that the first two weeks laid the "cornerstones" of successful online groups, thinking about the purpose (clear, inviting, relevant to the participants), the activities and tools to support those activities. These had been identified as the key design issues. This week's discussion got more into the process issues, specifically online.

Workshop experience

Towards the end of the third week, we began reflecting on our experiences in the workshop, identify ongoing learning opportunities and completed a survey. There was the opportunity to participate in a live After Action Review in our Elluminate room. There were live Friday meetings in the Elluminate room. The difficulty with the Friday meeting was with the time differences. However, some of the sessions were recorded and made available to members who could not participate. At the end of the event, participants gave their opinions and suggestions about the workshop. As is the case with online conferences, some invitees preferred to be quiet and just observe during the event. Nonetheless, the majority participated actively.

The post-workshop survey showed that most participants enjoyed working electronically and would like to use this format again. Although most people prefer face-to-face meetings, it was generally felt that the electronic workshop allowed and stimulated decision-making and the exchange of information among a group of globally dispersed people without incurring travel costs. A few other advantages associated with holding an electronic conference were noted:

- it can be organized with relatively short notice;
- participants who are travelling can still take part;
- participation doesn't require a full day's commitment; and
- people who normally don't speak up at face-to-face meetings usually contribute actively.

On the downside, it is easy to avoid or put off participating, certain time zones can make participation a little inconvenient, and more time might be needed for building online relationships. To minimize these disadvantages, it is important to provide good facilitation during an event.

It was felt that the IMark training material made an important contribution to the workshop. They also proved to be a useful and enjoyable way of studying collaboratively. Since online events are becoming more and more a platform of choice, the I-Mark group should provide more tools, tips and training on how to run and participate in online workshops, meetings and conferences so as to make people adapt to doing things online.

Reflection and Comments as workshop participants

As participants to the workshop, we have reflected on the various activities that we took part in, what we learned and found, and how we might relate it to our work as facilitators of the *itrainers* community of trainers.

Evaluation of other online communities

Social Software communities, by Clare

The social software communities' aims are to investigate how social software/web 2.0 technologies can best support teaching and learning in Vocational and Technical education and staff learning and development within and across organisations. This is something that we could borrow as the *itrainers* community. One positive thing about the communities is that their membership is specific but not limited to vocational technical education (VTE). They are open to any organisation that has successfully used web 2.0 technologies within and external to Australia. This is different to the *itrainers* community which is looking at a specific group of people in a specific geographical location. The communities' major activities are exploring how web 2.0 technologies can best support teaching and learning in vocational and technical education and exploring how these same technologies can best support staff learning and development within and across organisations. This is brilliant but from what I gathered, this community does more of research than trying to do it themselves. I wouldn't want to see the *itrainers* moving from its practical focus into this research direction.

Africa Source 2 by Ken

Going through the Africa Source 2 community I noticed that, even though it started from a short term event based on Open Source Software, members of the community seemed to be very eager to help each other. It no longer is as active in terms of postings as it was in the first few weeks preceding the Jan 2006 event, yet it is now more helpful than before to members. A member will occasionally post a challenge - usually technical - and then the more technical members of the community swarm around the problem. Apart from one member who regularly posts news and other related FOSS issues, no single member appears significantly louder than the rest. The members of the community also seem attached to each other even to the extent that members post issues on who is getting married, who has had a new baby.... These are things that could be adopted by the *itrainers* to bring in more of the human face.

On the Treasure Hunt game

Clare: This is a very interesting tool for learning. Personally I got very interested in pod casting which I think is a tool I would love to use with the *itrainers* community. Sometimes people prefer listening than reading! I actually created a pod cast on "the role of a facilitator". I intend to be communicating with the *itrainers* using voice occasionally. I also discovered the following tools:
- del.icio.us: which is a very powerful knowledge sharing tool
- blogs: something I had experimented with a couple of times, though I would prefer wiki's any day.

Ken: I investigated: del.icio.us, blogs, RSS, podcasts. Personally, I believe this is a game we can replicate within the *itrainers* community - perhaps on the first three tools, as pod casts can be somewhat RAM/bandwidth consuming.

On Learning Logs

Clare: Learning logs helped me "speak" to the participants. It's a very useful tool for online collaboration because you get people communicating, sharing ideas and helping other's learn. I think this is one of the advantages of online learning because here even the quiet people will speak out. The workshop facilitators used the learning logs as a way of establishing a personal communication with the participants. We got very inspiring feedback from them. This is a motivating factor. An example from Nancy "Clare, thank you for all of your participation and experimentation in the workshop. I loved that you created a pod cast! Good luck with the *itrainers* community - I know you and Ken will do a great job."

Ken: The learning logs worked great. During the workshop the importance did not appear that apparent to me - after all who fancies his/her thoughts. Now, months after the workshop, it reminds me of some of the thought processes I went through then. Great tool!

On Moodle

Clare: The moodle platform is brilliant. My first experience with it was like "this is a workshop alright". It would be great during the wrapping up of discussions of various topics plus story telling. However its down side is that you might not get everyone connecting due to connectivity problems (sometimes it takes quite a while to connect to it) and time differences.

Ken: Perhaps we could use Moodle during the Story telling activity envisaged for *itrainers* along the year. We (as in facilitators) however will have to learn how to set it up - which I'm sure shouldn't be too difficult. I'm sure it might add some life to the whole exercise.

What worked well in the virtual training workshop?

by Clare

I learnt a lot about face to face facilitation vis-à-vis online facilitation and I noticed the challenges that Nancy and Luca were facing. The most outstanding of them being their ability to **resolve issues of boredom, low energy in relation to poor or no participation at all**. However, I must commend them for trying hard to check on each one of us. It kept us alive and made one feel that **personal touch**. I personally try so hard to keep the *itrainers* participation but I do that by sending them all one email. I think getting personal with each of them is something that I should start to do.

The lesson on facilitation also had an interesting eye opener for me. For so long, I figured that facilitation simply means being the leader which involves, organising and spearheading. However, I realise that for one to be a good facilitator, they should **focus more on the process more than on the content**, and must also be aware of the different **communication styles** of the group that they facilitate. I have seen that work with this workshop and I must say, Luca and Nancy did a great job.

Reading through the IMARK lesson on developing your online community culture, I noted the following: Most communities thrive on knowledge exchange amongst community members however, facilitators don't sit down to think of the best ways in which this information should be exchanged to suit the members in the community. I guess this is because facilitators do not get time to study the needs of the community and how best to meet these needs. I will take an example of the community that I facilitate. I have on many occasions steered a topic and asked members to contribute to that topic with little or no response. I guess, many of them felt that this was not what they wanted or maybe the communication style wasn't that favourable. My lesson is that I should do my best to **meet the information needs of my community by carrying out information and communication needs analysis**. Nancy and Luca did practice what they preached.

I expanded my knowledge from just knowing that we can use blogs / wiki's to post information for people to look at to also knowing that we can **use blogs and wiki's as a knowledge bank** by tapping into other blogs and/wiki's and having everything in one place.

by Ken

One key thing I couldn't help but notice was Luca and Nancy's **personal touch with participants**. I remember on occasion, I didn't post for two days in a row and Nancy got in touch with a personal mail to find out if anything had gone wrong.

And the **tying of time to reading activities** also worked well. In my opinion a participant found it more inviting to read a piece when a part of the title tells him or her the approximate amount of time that would be spent reading. Like a shopper is more inclined to buy a product whose price is displayed. Again, this is something we could adopt in the *itrainers* community.

For **more information**, please see the following links:

- IMARK Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks http://www.imarkgroup.org/moduledescrC_en.asp
- For other IMARK learning modules, see www.imarkgroup.org
- *itrainers* community of trainers dgroup <http://www.dgroups.org/groups/itrainers/>
- IICD Background research leading to the establishment of the *itrainers* community of trainers <http://www.iicd.org/articles/iicdnews.2006-08-11.9482061111>
- Itrainonline web portal for training/learning resources on ICT www.itrainonline.org
- International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) www.iicd.org
- Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN (FAO) www.fao.org
- Full Circle Associates, www.fullcirc.com

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