

Assessment 2: Context Analysis
EDTC 677 Building Online Communities

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Matthew Farber interviewed Steve Dembo, Director of Social Media Strategy and Online Community. Sonaliz Morel spoke to Kelly Hines, Director of Personal Learning Communities. Hines works in southeast region with districts on using professional development and building communities to enhance teaching. Jennifer Serviss conversed with Dean Shareski the Community Manager for Discovery Education Canada. All of these individuals are managing a large community of followers on social media. On Twitter, as of February 11, 2015, these three people have a total over 54,000 followers.

DEN represents the community of educators centered on Discovery Education's tools, specifically the streaming subscription service, as well as the new interactive "Tech Book" initiative. For Discovery, the more tech-savvy teachers they have, the more likely they would use its services, like its webinars curriculum resources. "DEN Members" are anyone that engages with Discovery Education in the half million schools in the United States that subscribe. The DEN community is further represented by a tiered system of STARS and Ambassadors. The larger of the two subgroups are DEN STARS, comprised of about 8,000 people. Hines said, "In my opinion, 'STARS' represent the process of mentorship, collaboration and networking amongst community members," (personal communication, February 12, 2015).

Community Goals

Learning is essential and an integral part of our existence. Online communities allow individuals to learn together, discover similar interests, and share personal experiences through technology. When people collaborate together and share common interests, there is also a possibility for people to create new communities (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2012). The goal of the DEN is to help connect education professionals with one another. Hines explained that the purpose of the community was “to address the needs of its passionate educators, assist these professionals in navigating through their own unique career progressions, and create, maintain, and nurture valued community partnerships between the members of our network” (personal communication, February 12, 2015). Dembo further elaborated, noting that the community’s purpose is to drive users to the Discovery Education website. He said, “We have found that a tech-savvy teacher—one that knows how to integrate technology well in the classroom—tends to use our products and services. We generally feel we have the best nonfiction media out there; however, that is actually a secondary goal. We are trying to make a tangible difference in the state of the teaching field (personal communication, February 6, 2015).

The community manager’s role is to connect people to one another, as well as to facilitate meaningful exchanges of ideas. Stewarding online communities is essential. It is a process that embraces the importance of accountability and practice and understanding the design and administration of a community’s technology infrastructure (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2012). “We meet people at various different comfort levels,” Dembo explained. “Once someone enters into the community, they have a certain set of needs. After several years, they then have very different needs. We are constantly trying

to find new ways to keep them engaged, stimulated, challenged, and active and social” (personal communication, February 6, 2015). Kelly Hines concurred, adding, “As a community, we want to help educators showcase their talent and passion and assist them in doing what they love best: teach. As an online community, we constantly focus on where we want to be and evolve regularly based on the ideas that community members share” (personal communication, February 6, 2015).

Accomplishing Goals

According to Wenger, White, and Smith (2012), members of online communities can provide or get access to both informal and formal knowledge, learn to problem solve, collaborate, communicate, discuss important topics, create standards for the online community and explore ideas. DEN does an effective job in connecting lurkers to legitimate peripheral participation where the community offers learning opportunities to those who are familiarizing themselves with the community before they become fully engaged (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2012). Having online communities with members from different backgrounds can promote diversity, leadership and encourage legitimate peripheral participation.

The DEN community transcends the constraints of Discovery Education’s website. The community does not directly generate revenue, nor does it create products. “When you try and force a community to stay in one location, you’re fighting a battle,” Dembo explained. “Your organization is always one step out of, or away from, where [users] are already hanging out. Instead, we try to facilitate as much connection as we can in the places where members already are, like Edmodo, Twitter, Facebook, as so on” (personal communication, February 6, 2015). In other words, the strategy is to stay

“disjointed.” To that end, Discovery funnels its blogs through social media. Dembo continued, “Our stance is, wherever DEN STARS are congregating, we’re going to provide them ways to self-identify as DEN members and to create niche conversations” (personal communication, February 6, 2015).

Discovery’s role is to empower its community, while providing minimal support. Regarding school-based events, they typically send a representative, provide posters, handouts, and may even provide lunch. The community members run everything else. Another example is the Facebook group, DENvice, in which a DEN STAR is chosen to post discussion topics. Dembo stated, “The more we can make it centered around our community members, and less centered around us, the happier we are” (personal communication, February 6, 2015).

In 2014, 3,500 educators participated in community-organized “DENapaloozas,” which are a series of mini-conferences. Shareski explained, “The goal here is to have as many people experience the informal social experience of large conferences that cannot get to a larger conference site” (personal communication, February 13, 2015).

Metrics

Discovery has a couple of different levels within the community. They have DEN members, who are basically a participant or an active user of Discovery Education’s services. Next are STARS—people who have volunteered, completed an application, and have made a commitment to host training events. The number of STARS is one metric of growth. Dembo explained how grow needs to be meaningful, beyond just users filling out a form. STAR members must be active. In fact, Discovery deactivates people who

do not stay active (based on low network participation, as well as not reporting hosted events). As a result, community numbers fluctuate.

Another metric is the number of reported events from STARs, as well as the number of attendees reached and impacted through those events. Dembo explained, “If we’re teaching someone digital storytelling and they turn around and teach it to someone 50 teachers, that shows what our reach is” (personal communication, February 6, 2015). After a decade, Dembo reported that 1.5 million people have been reached through DEN events. What’s more, DEN STARs facilitated the reach, not Discovery.

Essentially, a platform can be defined as a technology package that incorporates various tools for community members to utilize (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2012). Because of the dispersed nature of the community across platforms, it is difficult to track of lurkers to active users compared to other communities that are more forum-based. Nonetheless, after a conference, the team can gauge usage and activity levels of Discovery products. It can also review data, such as customer satisfaction and external participant activity. The team also meets to review what community members are saying on social media, blogs, comments, posts, shares and twitter feeds.

In March 2011, a study was conducted to measure the effectiveness of the various resources that members use on DEN. Members from the Discovery Educator Network Leadership Council completed an online survey that evaluated how they used the different tools and how the use of technology affected their daily work. The results proved that DEN was positively beneficial to the overall professional growth of participants who were engaged in the online community and often used social media and other tools to interact with other DEN members (Briggs, & Holland, 2011). Furthermore,

97% of respondents reported that their use of technology had improved as a result of their involvement with DEN and 60% of respondents indicated that DEN resources were helpful in integrating technology in their districts (Briggs, & Holland, 2011).

Conclusions

There is a struggle of how to engage over one million users that may not want to connect like the 8,000 people that comprise the STARS, Gurus and Leadership Council. The majority of members do not participate actively. Those members that are active, however, do share passion projects. Shareski explained, “Teachers facilitate the classroom and, in the same way, the community feels that teachers also facilitate and share ideas. What we do in the community has not come from the team, but active participants in the community providing suggestions that is needed for their benefit” (personal communication, February 13, 2015).

Recently when asked for feedback regarding DEN frequent use of social media, 50% of DEN members utilize social media weekly for interaction (Figure 1). It also should be noted that 69% of individuals that use social media for DEN, stated that their participation in DEN social media sites have tremendously supported their professional growth (Figure 2). To that end, DEN believes in the importance of student success and achievement throughout school districts. Hines stated, “DEN is about creating opportunities for educators and sharing their success with other members of the community” (personal communication, February 12, 2015). Shareski concurred, stating, “As much as people think of Discovery Education as a content provider, the company is very much about the relationships of the people and the community. The goal is for continuous improvement for experiences for the community to resonate with people and

we have a myriad of ways that people can communicate and connect,” (personal communication, February 13, 2015).

DEN represents an online community that believes in the essence of maintaining an engaged and involved audience of education professionals. It is essential for online communities to create relationships with people in this digital era, where they can learn, share relevant, creative and innovative content with members (“The Truly Monumental Guide,” 2014; Kraut & Resnick, 2011). It is important to execute strategies that reflect the overall community’s goals and mission, holding on to the community’s identity and allowing members to make the community their own. In order to have a successful online community there must be a combination of social media tools, interesting content, collaboration with people that share similar passions and believe in the overall mission (“The Truly Monumental Guide,” 2014; Kraut & Resnick, 2011). Communities, such as DEN, evolve. Wenger, White, & Smith wrote, “It becomes a very creative practice that evolves along with the community and reflects the community's self-design—the process by which a community ‘design’ itself as a vehicle for learning, which includes use of technology” (2012, p. 25). DEN has accomplished exactly that.

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Appendix

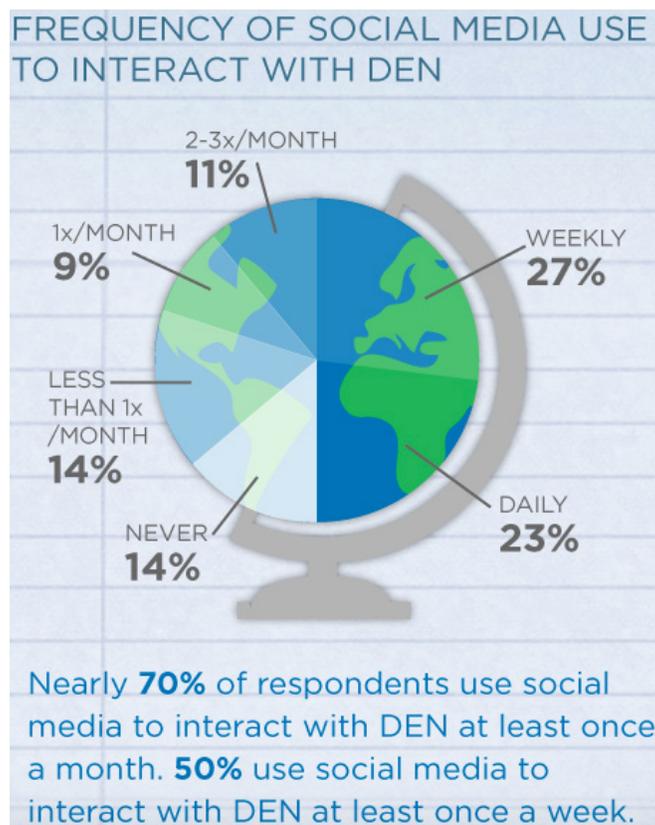


Figure 2: “An Evaluation of The Discovery Educator Network,” from <http://www.slideshare.net/ppalmer21/den-impact-study-2011>



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