

Educational Online Community Analysis

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Introduction

The International Writing Centers Association is one of the largest communities dedicated to college writing centers. It does not, however, host its' own online community. Instead, it recommends the Writing Centers' Online Discussion Community, otherwise known as WCenter (International Writing Centers Association, 2020). This is a listserv that currently has 3,762 members from colleges and universities spread across the United States and has over 38,000 messages in its' archives. It was started in February 2000, and operates out of Texas Tech University, in Lubbock, Texas (Writing Center's Online Discussion Community, 2020).

As with most listservs, this community gives the option to receive all messages as they are sent or packaged daily as a digest. Due to the number of messages that come through the listserv, often more than 60 per week, most community members opt to receive the daily digest which contain all of the days messages in one email. The discussions and posts revolve around writing center administration, tools that are used, technology that is used, conference information, and general queries regarding advice along with their responses. It is also a hub for those doing research who post links to surveys and actively reach out to list members to take part in interviews (Writing Center's Online Discussion Community, 2020).

Although there are older communities and communities with more members, WCenter is a very important community as it deals exclusively with college writing centers and a large percentage of college writing center administrators are a part of this group (Murphy & Stay, 2012). WCenter is heavily used by members of numerous professional tutoring and learning assistance organizations such as the National Tutoring Association, the Association for the Coaching and Tutoring Profession, the National College Learning Center Association, and the College Reading & Learning Association. It is often the first group recommended to new writing

center administrators as the quality of the information provided is well regarded and there are few off-topic posts (International Writing Centers Association, 2020; Murphy & Stay, 2012).

What is this Organization Seeking to Accomplish?

In order to better understand WCenter, what it does and why it does it, I communicated with two administrators from the group, one of whom is the main manager of the list. I will refer to these administrator's as Admin1 and Admin2, with Admin1 being the manager. Both were very happy to offer assistance and were willing to discuss many aspects of the group and answer questions (Appendix A). Because of time differences and teaching schedules, communication was spaced out over a number of days.

When asked what WCenter was seeking to accomplish, Admin1 replied that "WCenter seeks to provide a space for writing center administrators (directors, assistant/associate directors, coordinators, etc.), staff, and consultants/tutors to seek advice, share best practices, offer support, research, and sometimes vent or have a laugh" (personal communication, March 2, 2020). Admin2 also mentioned that when WCenter was created, the concept of online communities as they are thought of today did not yet exist, or was in its nascent stages. The goal really focused on providing a way for writing center administrators to connect with each other in a way that was simple and cost effective (personal communication, March 3, 2020).

What Actions Have Been Undertaken to Accomplish These Goals?

When it comes to accomplishing the goals set forth by WCenter, Admin2 was of the belief that, from his point of view, the goals are set by the community members as they are the ones utilizing the community, and that accomplishing these goals is a responsibility shared by the community members themselves (personal communication, March 3, 2020). Admin1 however takes a more proactive approach. Admin1 stated that she monitored incoming emails,

regularly offers advice on posting, assists in troubleshooting not just issues with the group but with writing center administration, and also helps community members with research questions (personal communication, March 2, 2020). She also noted that since she is the main face of the organization, she very much tries to lead by example both in the information she provides and the way that she interacts with the community.

From interacting with this group, it is now apparent that Admin1 does an admirable job in curating the content created by the members as any off-topic messages are not approved to pass on to the community members. Instead of directly contacting Admin1, whose information is available on the main site, I posted a query about contacting admins from the group and received a personal reply rather quickly, along with other group members providing me with Admin1's contact information.

One example of how this community responds to each other is this message and reply that was posted in early March, 2020:

Subject: Fee for permissions?

This isn't exactly a writing center question but it is tangentially related and I am not sure who else to ask: I have been asked for permissions for an article I published 10 years ago in an open source text book project. The email request includes a form that asks what my fee is but the email doesn't indicate a fee range. They plan to publish 3,300 copies of a reader for English 101 for a particular university and include my article. Anyone have any idea how much I could/should ask for? (even if it is zero dollars!)

Since this is not relevant to most, would you please email your response

to [REDACTED] instead of responding to the group (WCenter, March 2, 2020).

Re: Fee for permissions?

Does your university have a copyright or intellectual property office that can help? If your article was published in an open source textbook, I would also ask the publisher for advice, especially if the request is for commercial use by another publisher (WCenter, March 3, 2020).

Even though the request was not strictly in regards to writing center administrators, the group was able to give the original poster some information about next steps that they might be able to take. As not everyone may be aware of an intellectual property office on their campus, this can even be helpful for others who may wish to look into that at their own respective institutions.

Kraut and Resnick (2016) write that larger communities reduce “the marginal impact on any one member’s actions and thus reduces motivation to contribute” (p.69), yet they follow that by stating that “larger groups may be able to accomplish more and thus generate more commitment and motivation to continue” (p. 69). In regards to WCenter, each members actions may in fact be marginal in the overall scheme, but because there are so many contributing members whenever a question or concern is posed, there more often than not is a member who is able to provide either an answer or feedback.

What Metrics Are Used to Understand Progress Towards These Goals?

Admin1 was very upfront about the fact that they do not use any metrics at all to measure progress towards goals while Admin2 was of the opinion that since the goals are member-created, the organization itself cannot accurately measure progress (personal communication, March 2, 2020; personal communication, March 3, 2020). This idea does make sense since the goals are more focused on providing what individual members need rather than the organization as a whole. Admin1 did state that she hadn’t really given metrics much thought because of the

platform that this community uses, but she was intrigued by the idea and will be looking into how to monitor progress in the group (personal communication, March 2, 2020).

While measuring progress is important, the administrators of this community are comfortable with the direction that this group is moving in based on factors other than metrics. Many colleges and organizations point people to this particular group for information, including Colorado State University (Colorado State University, 2020), the South Central Writing Center Association based at the University of Texas-Austin (SCWCA, 2020), and Eastern Oregon University (EOU, 2020). The writing center community as a whole appears to respect WCenter enough to refer to it almost universally as a resource worth looking into.

Conclusion: Is This a Successful Community?

Johnston (2013) lists nine attributes to a thriving online community, which includes: 1) Shared Value, 2) Shared Identity, 3) Vibrant Participation, 4) Community Leadership, 5) Quality Content, 6) Expertise, 7) Culture of Trust, 8) Elegant Experience, and 9) Growth and Responsiveness. The WCenter listserv, with the exception of “Elegant Experience,” meets all of the aforementioned attributes.

Members frequently comment on the value of the community and there is a feeling of shared identity amongst them. The participation is vibrant as messages are posted multiple times per day, every day of the week. The leadership is not top-down, with one person in charge. Instead, there are longtime group members who are active in the community experience making it seem more like shared governance, with the members having a say in the overall running of the group. There is a great deal of quality content as well as expertise as some members have been in the group for the last twenty years and have a great deal of information and expertise in the field. A culture of trust does abound as group members often share a great deal of information in

regards to difficulties they may be experiencing without fear of being laughed at or talked down to. The growth and responsiveness is also there, as my own questions have been answered quickly and professionally while the group has gained over 300 members in the few years that I have been a part of it. Because of this, I would not hesitate to state that this community is successful.

As for being an elegant experience, since it is a listserv, there is little to the experience at all except for the messages and a searchable archive that look as though it was created 20 years ago. In this area I can provide recommendations that could assist in making the experience more current. It is too much to ask that almost 4,000 members switch from a listserv to a Facebook group, but perhaps there is a listserv platform that will allow for more flexibility when it comes to assessing goals and, more importantly, make the archives easier to locate and search. Mobilize is one such platform that is an alternative to the standard listserv.

According to Mobilize.io,

Mobilize provides built-in-analytics on e-mail response as a listserv. Administrators can target their follow-ups according to interaction (who did or did not view, click, RSVP, or vote). Friendly, visually engaging dashboards make critical information easily accessible to all group members, opening up your communication style to whichever is best suited for your group (Mobilize.io, 2020).

This would also allow for the direct sharing of documents, presentations, and video content while also making finding individual messages, or even entire conversations, much easier. It would also provide the admin with the analytics needed to measure the groups' growth and progress towards goals. Group members would even be able to continue to just

receive either the daily digest or the messages as they come in without needing to utilize the other functionalities.

Exploring Additional Online Communities

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) founded in 1967, is an organization that is dedicated to assisting with building educator's capacity and improvements particularly in the field of teaching and learning all languages at varied levels. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages or ACTFL requires individuals to have a paid membership. At this time, the organization has over 12,500 members that consist of educators, administrators from elementary through college level, as well as government agencies. According to ACTFL.org (2004) the organization's overall mission is "Providing vision, leadership and support for quality teaching and learning of language." The overall vision is to have a belief that language is the center or heart of the human experience.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages offers professional development for its members which empower participants to collaborate with others and share their knowledge about foreign languages. ACTFL also assists with providing educators with specific indicators pertaining to The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. These standards define critical roles of world languages in our students' future careers, as well as provide a framework for the curricular integration of collaboration with communities beyond the classroom in order to encourage students to appropriately and effectively engage in global communities both during and after their formal language instruction.

Furthermore, in addition to ACTFL's online learning community, ACTFL also has a secondary avenue in which they share their vision, mission and goals within their social learning community on twitter. ACTFL's twitter account, <https://twitter.com/actfl>, currently has 22.7

thousand followers who demonstrate their support for world language teaching and learning at all instructional levels.

What is the organization seeking to accomplish through their online community?

In order to obtain personalized information about how ACTFL members utilize information learned via the ACTFL learning community site as well as social media, the researcher interviewed “JC,” Professor of Foreign Languages at Rutgers University (New Brunswick, NJ Campus) for over 10 years and active member and presenter of The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. JC currently instructs students of various backgrounds and levels of ability at the college level. JC explained that Rutgers University has access to several onsite and offsite learning communities for their instructors, but he expressed how he enjoys being a member of ACTFL as he feels that he can reach out to educators all around the world to share his expertise and or to learn from them.

JC also expressed how he likes the fact that he can share his views with others without being judged. JC added that he regularly refers to the ACTFL Guidelines which sets a specific criterion for language acquisition at all levels. The interviewer asked JC, “What is the importance of ACTFL guidelines and how do you incorporate them into your teaching? JC stated, The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines allow for him to measure students’ progress and allow for him to use a set criterion to identify what his students can do with the language in terms of listening, speaking, writing, and reading. “ACTFL has 5 different levels with distinguished being the highest and novice, which is considered the lowest level of language attainment.” (JC, 2020).

What actions have they taken towards accomplishing these goals?

The interviewer asked JC, what is ACTFL's overall goals via their social media platform on twitter? JC stated, ACTFL wants its followers to be informed consumers. To obtain a more in-depth understanding of the importance of language education. "The ACTFL website is mainly for educators and administrators. It's a paid membership which not everyone may be able to afford, particularly students who are trying to further their education to obtain a better job or careers. I like the fact that they have another platform and that it is free. My students are a part of the ACTFL Twitter community. They are doing an amazing job at reaching out to a larger community. They share greatness via that outlet and have thousands of followers. It's a community that celebrates diversity, language education, literacy, equity and acceptance. I would also say that it brings awareness. The other day my student asked me if I knew that the Department of Education was possibly looking into eliminating funding for international education programs. I smiled because he is learning about our country and the need to speak up." (JC, 2020).

What metrics do they employ to understand their progress towards these goals?

ACTFL continues to provide its learning community with relevant and important information. Not only are they lead learners, but they are also an active advocacy group. For instance, on ACTFL.org, one can learn about the most current issues pertaining to language education and speaking up as a community. Under the advocacy tab, a member (Alexandria, 2020) released a statement in regard to the Trump administration budget and how ACTFL is in strong opposition of the proposed budget cuts which will have a negative and direct effect on programs that are vital to the language education community.

The interviewer asked JC, Does ACTFL provide its members with strategies or information in regard to the use of technology in the classroom? JS expressed that ACTFL keeps

their participants current on the use of technology in the classroom. He mentioned that they have a few articles online in regard to how technology should not take the place of the educator. He added that the article offers effective teaching strategies, and the importance of using technology in language education classrooms.

After conducting the interview, the researcher further explored ACTFL.org and located the article that the interviewee referred to in his interview. According to the article, *The Role of Technology in Language Learning* (ACTFL, 2020), “ACTFL strongly recommends that a language educator be responsible for the planning, instruction, assessment, and facilitation of any language course, leveraging technology to support language learning. Language instruction is best guided by language educators rather than solely delivered via a computer program or by a non-content specialist.” The article added that research does not support language educators to utilize technology in isolation.

Conclusion

ACTFL.org as well as twitter.com/actfl, are successful online learning communities. Both learning communities have well over 10,000 members that actively contribute to the community. In my opinion, ACTFL continue to be an effective and successful learning community because it made a purposeful decision to extend their website and paid membership to other groups of people via social media. “There are two things that compel online community members to stick around, the urge to contribute to the community and the perception of benefitting from the community.” (Johnson, 2014). ACTFL’s online learning community encompasses both.

Additionally, ACTFL seems to have been able to bring in and maintain the right people within their community. Having the right people in your online community is crucial. Both of their communities are driven by their participants, which is the ultimate goal. According to Kraut

and Resnick (2016). “Many hands make light work according, to the proverb. But only if all those hands actually do some work. To be successful, online communities need the people who participate in them to contribute the resources on which the group's existence is built.” ACTFL has been able to manage exactly that.

Collaboration

Group 2 Members: John Findura and Iris Castillo

John Findura's contributions were related to the WCenter listserv, the research surrounding this group, and the interviews with the two administrators.

Iris Castillo contributions pertained to The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages online communities. Iris Castillo conducted an interview on an active member and presenter of the ACTFL community. The interviewee, JC is also a college professor at Rutgers University where he utilizes strategies recommended by The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, and recommends for all of his students to engage in learning and contributing to ACTFL social media platform on twitter. Via twitter participants are able to learn from one another, engage in discussions and utilize their voice and agency to advocate for language education, diversity and equity.

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Appendix A

Questions for WCenter Admins

1. What is WCenter trying to accomplish through this online community? Are there specific goals, and if so, what are they?
2. What actions has WCenter and its' admins taken towards accomplishing these goals (such as seeding discussions, creating incentives, leading by example, etc.)?
3. Do you employ any metrics to understand progress towards these goals (such as turnaround time, speed/quality of question answering, etc.), and if so, what metrics do you currently use?

Appendix B

Additional Questions for interviewee, JC, Active ACTFL Member and Presenter.

1. What is the importance of ACTFL guidelines and how do you incorporate them into your teaching?
2. What is ACTFL's overall goals via their social media platform on twitter?
3. Does ACTFL provide its members with strategies or information in regard to the use of technology in the classroom?