EDTC 816: Educational Online Community Analysis

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Introduction

Stemming from the National Literacy Act of 1991, the Literacy Information and

Communication System (LINCS) evolved from a repository of adult education resources into

-an online site for adult education practitioners. The LINC website is comprised of four main

components and includes a resource collection, a professional development center, several

online communities of practice, and a learning portal (LINCS, 2019a). Under the U.S.

Department of Education's (ED) Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE)

since 2010, LINC is a national organization with resources also available at the state level

(LINCS, 2019b).

The LINC community has a public facing site with many resources available for

visitors. By creating an account, users gain additional rights and access to the community and

its subsections. This allows members to collaborate with other members of the 13,600 plus

members, create a profile, participate in online communities, bookmark resources, create lesson

plans, and subscribe to different groups (D.Rosen, personal communication, March 5, 2019).

For this analysis, we will be focusing on one of the eleven public LINCS groups - the

Integrating Technology and Learning Group which describes itself as a community of practice

for practitioners and boasts close to 2,000 members. The group is moderated by Mr. David J.

Rosen, a professional developer and community member not employed by LINCS or OCTAE.

The community utilizes a variety of online tools to promote asynchronous online collaboration

between its members. These include a discussion forum, curated bulletins, polls, a member

directory as well as yet unused calendar and documents section (LINCS, 2019c).

Accomplishments

The LINCS Integrating Technology Community exists within the broader scope of users interested resources utilized in the practice of adult education. David Rosen states that "the LINCS Community of Practice, one of the three LINCS components, provides a free opportunity for researchers and practitioners to learn about important emerging and long-time topics in the adult basic skills education field (including basic literacy through preparation for post-secondary education, and English for Speakers of Other Languages ESOL/ESL), to contribute their thoughts, to raise and/or answer questions and engage in dialogue with colleagues across the country" (See Appendix A).

The Integrating Technology group actions are to strengthen the knowledge and expertise within the membership as each member strives to move forward using digital platforms in their professional capacity. The group projects within the Integrating Technology Group developed and created "micro-group projects" (See Appendix A). The focus of one micro-project group was to evaluate online tools for use by the community members. Another "micro-group" focus is specific to Google Apps Suite called the "Digital Toolbelt" consisting of numerous applications to help increase teacher awareness and expertise in the use of these tools in their daily instruction (Eight-week "Digital Toolbelt "micro-group on using Google tools began October 15, 2018, 2018).

Actions

Meeting the goals of the community is accomplished in two ways. First, the Drupal content management platform supports the online activities of the organization and its smaller communities. The Drupal platform hosts the website, allows for the management of content, users, permissions, and access, and can be expanded through the addition of different modules (Drupal, 2018). The platform has allowed for a clean, modern looking website that is intuitive to most users providing a welcoming environment in which to interact with other practitioners.

Within the Integrating Technology community, a clean layout allows members to see the mission of the group through a welcome from the moderator. A navigation bar allows the user to easily access sections dedicated to discussions, bulletins, members, and polls. A feed of recent activity highlights new members, changes to the bulletins and discussions in chronological order. The platform provides users with a sense of longevity, shared value, community, and trust - critical features of a thriving online community. The intuitive nature of the platform allows the moderator to focus one's attention elsewhere such as micro-group projects (D.Rosen, personal communication, March 5, 2019). The moderator works to keep the community active through regular 'how to' discussion posts, a welcoming nature, encouragement of setting up a user profile, and smaller side projects.

Along with these micro-group projects, the community utilizes other methods to keep up to date, advance, and fulfill the members such as discussions, bulletins, polls, events, members, and search on a dashboard. Within these pages are multiple professional development resources. The attraction within this community is the diversity of the micro groups. Each micro group covers various aspects of technology field peaking member interest

to join because of their shared interest in the topic (Kraut, Resnick, & Kiesler, 2016). With the

inclusion of many micro-group projects, a shared practice continues the critical bond and

connection between members with a common interest to reflect the diverse and complex

driving engine which describes a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Metrics

Assessment and evaluation are an essential component for any organization in gauging its success and measuring goal achievement through the use of direct measures. It is also an area where some of the information may not be readily available. Though the Integrating Technology community does not formally keep metrics, a formal two-year evaluation of LINCS as a whole was conducted by RMC Research Corporation in 2003 and reported to the National Institute of Literacy in 2005. The purpose of the study was to 'examine the use, quality, value, and effectiveness of LINCS resources, the infrastructure created to disseminate these resources, and the activities funded by LINCS that support implementation and use of LINCS nationwide (National Institute for Literacy, 2005). The report deemed the overall usefulness of the larger community as effective. It is the mandate of the greater LINCS system to address an otherwise unmet public need (National Institute for Literacy, 2005).

Obtaining current data was difficult and probably not relevant to the organization as the efforts of LINCS is to provide a common good and therefore difficult to assess. Information on membership, courses, and other resources are available through direct observation on the website. Through communication with the moderator, there does not appear to be an active effort to track metrics on an ongoing basis. From direct observation, the Integrating Technology community boasts an active membership with activity in the form of increased membership and posting of discussions and bulletins daily.

Conclusion

The LINCS Integrating Technology community exhibits elements of Johnson's (2013) attributes of a thriving online community. These include shared values and identify, active participation, leadership, and high-quality content. These attributes are exhibited by both browsing the website as well as through a more formal evaluation that took place in 2003 - 2005. It is clear that the group moderator for the community (Wenger, 2009) is a driving force, illustrating all the other elements comprising a thriving community. The technology steward functionality takes place at a higher level and is administered by Manhattan Strategy Group and managed through support by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE).

Kraut, Resnick, & Kiesler (2016) states that commitment is the essential "building block" for communities to thrive and survive, especially in this digital world (p. 77). Some of the efforts to promote commitment include a mission statement on the opening page of the community contained within the welcome from the moderator. The moderator has made an effort to provide information on how to navigate the pages as well as encouraged the members to provide a brief bio about themselves in the discussion forum. For many of these introductions, the moderator has actively given feedback.

One suggestion to improve the social presence of the community would be to increase their social media presence. As it currently stands, LINCS has 370 members in their LinkedIn group and 312 YouTube subscribers compared to over 13,000 LINCS registered members. Based on the nature of the organization as a service to the community, there may not be a formal initiative to go beyond their existing structure.

Collaboration

Group Members: Douglas J. Koch, Carol A. Munn, and Susan Van Alstyne

Doug: Identified organizations of interest along with the rest of the group. The three of us worked collaboratively utilizing open and ongoing communication via whatsapp, email and Google apps. Outside of reaching out to the communities, which was done by Carol and Susan, there wasn't an aspect of the project that wasn't touched by everyone.

Carol: Our group worked really well together to complete the project. We started this project early and collaborated frequently through online chats, shared Google Docs & and email. We started with a Google doc for brainstorming. This project came together very nicely even though the responses to our interview requests were very disappointing. A challenge at the start, responses from our contact list were very low. So we decided, as a group, to offer different options such as Google Hangout, Chat, Skype, and email. We received responses from 90% of contacted people. A few contacts offered follow up conversations to address any further questions or clarification on issues. As a team, each of us took on a role of researcher, writer, and editor. Collaboration was the key in which all sections were worked on, contributed to, and asked for opinions by all team members.

Susan: We communicated early and often through various channels such as WhatsApp, email, and our shared Google document. It is difficult to identify who completed various tasks other than Carol creating the shared document, another member creating the WhatsApp group, and another submitting the document as we all worked together to contact organizations to secure interviews. We made group decisions and we all equally contributed to the final product. I can say we incorporated many of the qualities of a successful community to accomplish our goal.

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Appendix A

Online Community Questions & Responses

Replies from David J. Rosen, Moderator of two LINCS CoP groups: Integrating Technology and Program Management
  1. What is the organization seeking to accomplish through their online community?
       a. How have technologies helped you meet this goal?
       b. What social media platforms do you use?
       c. How you communicate or share activities in your online community? (e.g. chats, emails, newsletters, announcements, blog, meetings, forums).
       d. What is your recruitment process?

The LINCS Community of Practice, one of the three LINCS components, provides a free opportunity for researchers and practitioners to learn about important emerging and long-time topics in the adult basic skills education field (including basic literacy through preparation for post-secondary education, and English for Speakers of Other Languages ESOL/ESL), to contribute their thoughts, to raise and/or answer questions and engage in dialogue with colleagues across the country.

       a. The Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS), originally developed in the 1980's, and since updated several times, is built on an online platform. (I believe the current one is Drupal-based.) LINCS offers free online courses, a fully-vetted collection of online resources, a Community of Practice (CoP), and an adult learner resources section.
       b. Drupal, I think, which is used to host the LINCS content
       c. Announcements and discussion forums in the CoP primarily. Also a little-used in-mail feature
       d. We use personal contacts at conferences, social media (e.g. Twitter) and creation of new private groups at the request of various public agencies and perhaps private organization.

  2. How does the online community promote connections, collaboration and bonding together among members?
       a) In what ways do you plan for the incorporation of new technologies?
       b) What metrics do they employ to understand their progress towards these goals?
       c) How is activity tracked?
       d) Why have certain types of activity been chosen to track?
       e) What additional are available in your online community?

       a. That is the responsibility of Manhattan Strategy Group (MSG), the LINCS content contractor; Civic Actions, the LINCS Technical contractor; and the Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education (OCTAE) in the U.S. Department of Education, the funder.
       b. ? Not sure what goals this refers to.

      c. Civic Actions provides monthly data to CoP group moderators
      d. This would be a question for MSG and Civic Actions
      e. Additional what?

3. How do you see the role of your organization within the larger landscape of education, teaching, learning, media, and technology?

Professional Development for the adult basic skills field

      a) What technical skills are needed to manage the online community?
      b) What are a few online projects the community has worked on?

      a. From a moderator point of view, not many. The system is fairly intuitive. From a user point of view, registering can be a challenge for some.
      b. The Integrating Technology group that I moderate has had a few micro-group projects including micro-groups evaluating online tools, and a micro-group focused on increasing teacher expertise in using a range of Google tools, called the Digital Toolbelt

4. What is your membership numbers for the entire community, including subcommittees?

For all of the LINCS community, that would be a question for Civic Actions or for MSG. For my two CoP Groups, as of 3.5.19 :

Integrating Technology: 1952
Program Management:　1149