

# CREATING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

## USING A FORUM AND OTHER TOOLS TO ENGAGE YOUR LEARNERS



**The traditional college community:** An educational community at a college or university benefits from many interactions between individuals and groups including structured lessons, but also informal contact and conversations in the seminar room, in corridors and during breaks. This is something to bear in mind when thinking about creating an online community.

**The online community:** It is important to provide a structured learning environment with regular opportunities to connect with tutor and peers. Students need the support of their community to thrive. In languages this is especially important because language learning requires interaction. Designing varied and well-integrated activities will aid learning and community building. However, it's easy to overload learners: more tools and more activities does not always mean more engagement. Here is some guidance to help you create an online community, focusing mostly on the use of forums.

### ONLINE FORUMS

**Forums can keep students connected to their tutor and peer group. They are useful for community building, information sharing and group discussions.**

**Principles of forum moderation:** When moderating your forum, you will typically encourage contributions, give regular responses, keep discussions going, summarise information, provide feedback, and conclude discussions. It is important to have rules of engagement (netiquette / institutional guidelines about online conduct) and also to think about the level of your engagement. 'Light forum moderation' is often best: the moderator is present but does not stifle discussion by intervening constantly or correcting all errors.

**Use of target language in forums:** You will be considering which language you want your students to use in online forums. Your language choice will depend on the level of study and may vary according to the purpose of each forum activity or discussion. In some discussions you may allow students to use English (for example, when exchanging study tips). Other activities could encourage students to use the target language, however simple. You can refer students directly to a resource where they can find the language they need, or you can provide some phrases for them in the introduction to the task. You can also have some discussion threads where students can freely mix languages (especially as such plurilingual practices are now thought to aid rather than hinder language learning).

#### Forum Activities

- **Easy** activities that allow meaningful communication through quick, low-risk participation; can combine social focus and language practice. "I had a good / boring /... weekend, because..."
- **Group-building** activities, e.g. 'two truths and one lie' (everybody posts two things that are true and one lie – the others have to guess)
- Sharing **study tips**
- Sharing **interests**: for example, posting about a film they watched

## Varying forum activities to keep up interest

- **Images:** students post an image of their favourite object / landscape / ...
- **Description:** students describe what they see when sitting at the computer/the holiday they are dreaming of, ...
- **Divergent** discussion: students discuss a controversial topic
- **Convergent** discussion: students make a joint decision, e.g. which candidate is the best for a job

## Some examples of forum posts

### Starting a forum activity:

*"In this strand everybody will write about their favourite place. I'll make a start. My favourite place is xxx, because... What is your favourite place and why? If you like, post a picture with your contribution."*

*"The increase in tuition fees at English universities a few years ago has been very controversial, and we'll use this strand to debate the pros and cons. Make sure you have read (xxx in your course materials) and use expressions from the list "Giving your opinion" (attached again here). While students in Germany only pay a small administrative fee for studying at a university, in England, tuition fees are now over £9000 per year. What are the pros and cons of such fees? What is your opinion?"*

### Responding to posts / encouraging contributions

*"I've been to xxx myself a little while ago and loved it. Has anybody else in the group been there?"*

*"You've mentioned a lot of arguments against tuition fees. What might be the arguments in favour? Are there any?"*

### Feedback

*"Thanks for the great contributions here! Here is a little bit of language feedback..."*

*Note some good expressions which will be helpful for you in your exam essays:*

*(Pull out some examples of good expressions students have used in the forum)*

*"Pay attention to the following*

*Word order (example)*

*Expressions with prepositions (example)"*

### Summarising / Concluding

*"To summarise the main points made in this discussion:*

*Arguments against tuition fees: xxxx*

*Arguments in favour: xxxx*

*Almost everybody in this group is against tuition fees."*

*"This discussion is now closed as we're moving on to our next topic. Look out for the strand on xxx and make sure you contribute by Friday."*

## FURTHER GUIDANCE ON ONLINE COMMUNITIES

**E-mail:** Occasional individual email contact with learners can help keep them engaged with their community, but it does not create a community. This one-to-one contact can also be provided by phone or via other synchronous communication tools (e.g. skype, FaceTime, etc.)

**Live online sessions:** Regular live online sessions can play an important role in building a community and keeping learners engaged. They can be whole group or small group events – or both, if you have online rooms with breakout facilities. In languages, of course, live sessions are particularly useful for interactive speaking skills practice.

**Taking the lead from the students:** It's important to include students in the discussions of how to create a supportive learning environment. They will have their own preferences regarding how they like to connect.

Encourage the formation of peer-support groups and have volunteer 'student buddies' who are willing to facilitate such groups. You may be able to provide an online room where students can meet without a teacher.

Acknowledge that students will use the online environment in their own ways, they are likely to take social activities outside the official course platform, and this also helps them to stay connected.

**Safeguarding:** Make sure you follow your institution's safeguarding advice in order to keep you and your students safe online.

## FURTHER TOOLS FOR BUILDING ONLINE COMMUNITIES

This help sheet concentrates mostly on forums, but of course there are many different ways for students to engage jointly online which can help build a community.



**Collaborative writing tools:** Offer opportunities for co-creation, for example, students write a text together, or each complete a different part of a task/a worksheet (jigsaw principle).



**Visual collaboration tools:** Can help visualize joint engagement, for example, everybody uploads an image onto a tool such as 'Padlet' (<https://en-gb.padlet.com>), or each student contributes 20 words on a topic and the contributions are then shown in a word cloud (e.g. [wordart.com](http://wordart.com))



**Survey tools:** Especially in larger groups, surveys can be an easy way to give an opinion on a topic anonymously or come to a group decision. The teacher can then publish the overall outcome.

A platform which offers a number of tools is edmodo (<https://new.edmodo.com/>).