Building Digital Connection in Uncertainty

What Students Need to Find Community Online

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

INNOVATION HUB

BUILDING COMMUNITY ONLINE

Community building at U of T has always been important. The pandemic has exacerbated community building; students report that it has created increased disconnection through social isolation[1]. Society is in a more uncertain state, fear has increased, and future possibilities (or future "normality") seem suspended.

We wanted to know what community building in this context entails. This project was carried out to provide insights to people offering programming around this online community building.

There is also potential for digital communities tap into new possibilities afforded by digital platforms, by fostering student-centric values and encouraging student-led participation.

Successful digital communities act as secure anchors for students, grounding them in meaningful engagement and giving them hope to continue through the struggles of the pandemic.

Community builders can secure students in multiple ways: by creating open spaces that are attentive to intimacy and vulnerability; by developing and reasserting a shared community experience and history; by fostering student-centric and student/participant-led community online spaces.

Sharing is Caring

Digital communities act as secure anchors...

...for meaningful engagement

The Power of Vulnerability

Empowering Student Voices

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[1] University of Toronto Division of Student Life & Innovation Hub. (2020). How Are You Doing? Student Feedback Sessions – Themes & Insights Based on Virtual Conversations with Students. University of Toronto. Toronto, Canada.

THE POWER OF VULNERABILITY

Students share that genuine connection comes with vulnerability through which they feel authentic. When they feel authentic, they feel connected with the fellow students and community with which they share online time.

THE POWER OF A FACE

Students feel more engaged when the cameras are on. When we show our faces, we create the potential for connection. Faces, even via a screen, speak volumes, giving opportunities to better understand others and others to better understand us. Conversely, turning on the camera can add intensity as it puts a lot of pressure and focus on ourselves, especially on our appearance.

While camera use can be encouraged, it is important to note that vulnerability looks different for everyone and communities should be flexible in the ways that community members choose to participate, whether that's as active participants or observers.

"As soon as that person turned on their camera, I guess our conversation changed. We started talking about life, we started talking about more things than just the project that we were working on. And I don't know if it's just me, but I guess seeing her face made all the difference."

VULNERABILITY CAN LEAD TO UNITY

Being open and honest with people, especially with those you have just met through a screen, can leave students feeling vulnerable and exposed, but it is also a force of unity. Discussing both the good and the bad, including the difficulties faced in the pandemic, can foster empathy, giving students the opportunity to feel heard and to appreciate the highs and lows that everyone faces.

Online communities can create safe spaces for students to be their authentic, vulnerable selves, which can further unite a group, creating stronger and deeper connections. Like a feedback loop, vulnerability can lead to greater unity and greater unity provides more opportunities for students to be open with their community.

CONNECTED YET DISCONNECTED

Online communication makes connection more accessible in many ways. However, while there are many opportunities to connect online, the lack of subtleties of in-person interactions, such as body language, tone, and timing, can leave students feeling disconnected.

In **asynchronous communication** , conversations may feel stagnant rather than naturally free-flowing. The lack of non-verbal cues and context can create more opportunities for misinterpretation. In **synchronous communication**, silences mixed in with technical difficulties can make for awkward conversations. These online communication conditions leave students uncomfortable and anxious to participate. More can be done than simply providing a space for communication.

"But I think it's really intimidating to post in there or comment. I always react with emojis because, (...) I don't feel close enough to the people in the group or discord group to want to share. So I think it's, it makes me happy to see people post in there, but I wouldn't do that."

"At this point, I think I had not seen my partner in about a month, plus school was getting really hectic […] I get built-up isolation almost. And what I do, I just had a little baby cry, now just on the phone with my partner [...] and it felt great. [...] And it kind of made me realize that other people are probably going through the same thing."
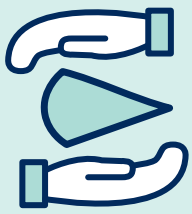
SHARING IS CARING

Students pursue community and connect when there is something shared, such as interests or experiences. When there is this shared and common ground, they can feel connected and continue their engagement.

TROUBLE SHARED IS TROUBLE HALVED

When students went through **a period of transition or struggle**, they reported forging **a sense of camaraderie and a stronger connection** with those who have gone through **similar experiences**.

Students desire a sense of belonging during a time of struggle; students need to feel that their experiences aren't unique and that their peers are going through similar issues; they need to feel understood by someone who has also lived it.

"... And it kind of made me realize that other people are probably going through the same thing. So once people started putting it out in the community channels, it's like, everyone kind of adds in"

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

Students reported a **sense of fulfilment and belonging** when they were a **part of communities based on shared interests and/or experiences**.

A few students mentioned they tend to seek out connections based on things or experiences that shaped their identity such as ethnicity and hobbies or passions, and that they were more likely to engage with these connections as opposed to others as there is common ground for conversation.

"So it's really easy to find yourself as a part of a community when you find someone that shared a same hobbies with you and also share the same interest."

SHARED PURPOSE

Students expressed that most fulfillment occurred in communities where they were working towards common goals (e.g., professional/skill development, health). When students find themselves in a community whose members, they share interests with, they try to work towards achieving a shared vision.

They form a sense of unity and purpose in such communities. (e.g., a student mentioned that their interest for sustainable development brought their friend group together, which allowed them to create a student hub for like-minded people who share the same goal of acting on the shared interest).

"It's like a tiny little team. And I've asked to be a part of it. And now I am and that has been very fulfilling because we've been trying to do things and to really make herself like a team and actually plan events more, like systematically and stuff and have a vision and have mission and goals. So I think that's definitely helped.

And I also tried to put myself I also tried to find an internship and I did for I found like a startup thing. And that has also been pretty fun."
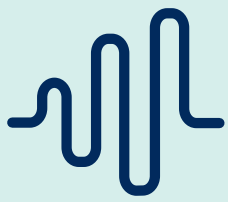
EMPOWERING STUDENT VOICES

Students are frustrated with the breakdown of their personal boundaries, stemming from scheduling difficulties, the complexities of many options to engage with community, and feeling overwhelmed. When the students are empowered to seek what they want and say no, they feel their needs are being met.

BOUNDARY AWARENESS

Students expressed frustration that their **boundaries between school, rest, and socializing were not respected**. This frustration speaks to the importance of maintaining a sense of control over one's social interactions. When students' boundaries are respected, students are empowered and more willing to engage.

"I think that has been one of the most annoying things about I guess this digital reality is that everyone kind of just assumes that you're willing to meet at any time of the day just because of how easy it is to turn on your laptop.

And so I'll have group meetings that end or that go till 10pm and I hate that. Why are we meeting till 10pm? I wish I could set boundaries but people want to meet later now just because they can and that has been very annoying for me."

REPRESENTATION ENABLES ENGAGEMENT

Having communities run by students demonstrates meaningful attentiveness to and care for student needs. By having digital communities managed by peers, there is an environment of openness and authenticity as students feel more comfortable engaging with fellow students who they feel they can relate to rather than staff who are disconnected from their life experiences.

"I created a discord for students at my faculty to utilize during the virtual school year. And it's been pretty successful. [..] I definitely facilitate it. I'm definitely in charge, I make all the rules. If you break the rules, I'll kick you out.

But in general, I try really hard to just let people do what they want. I just give them a space for it. They asked for an Among Us voice channel. So I created that. There's basically a channel for every hobby that someone has asked for. And as it's developed, I just see how people utilize it and how people want it to be run. And based on feedback, I just changed things as we go."

COMMUNITY MIRRORING

Students find themselves being more engaged **when events are designed in a way that mirror or simulate the experience of interacting in person**, empowering them to take control of how they navigate and interact in the space.

"A time when I felt part of a community was recently when a company I contract for, they did this virtual event via Zoom. And it was like a scavenger hunt plus trivia night. And that timing in between actual activities where you would like, be chatting with a bunch of people that I work with. And so those times, I would say, made me feel almost like I was part of a community within that, within that session."

"I would say being around most of them together and kind of going in and out of rooms, kind of like you would at a traditional workplace. Versus like, most of my Zoom meetings are just like one-on-one or just a few people, and you stay in one room, and nothing really happens for the most part. Um, so I think I think having that many people and kind of navigating the space online almost, like, as close as possible, I guess, to how you might navigate the space, on premise."

SIGNALS OF SUCCESS
DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Here we offer some guiding ideas for the design of digital community that emerged from our findings and that can help students find meaningful connection. We provide the design principles as well as some examples of how each principle can be put into practice.

SAFETY FIRST

Moments of vulnerability are only possible when community members feel safe and supported. Online communities can create an environment where students feel comfortable and safe sharing their stories, leading to deeper and more meaningful connections.

- ☐ Emphasize the intention – discuss with community members why vulnerability and providing a safe environment are important for connection
- ☐ Openly recognize the awkwardness of online communication so that members don't feel alone
- ☐ Divide online sessions into parts in which one is recorded and shared asynchronously, and the other part is not recorded, encouraging students who feel uncomfortable being recorded to participate
- ☐ Set ground rules about respect and boundaries

CREATE SPACE FOR CONNECTION

It can be easy for members to opt-out of sharing parts of their selves online, sometimes by default. Online communities should provide opportunities for authentic/intimate communication, which can come from building rapport among members, listening to the speaker to understand rather than to respond, and asking questions.

- ☐ Encourage those who are comfortable to turn on their camera and microphone
- ☐ Incorporate small-group discussions and allow natural conversation by being flexible about time and discussion topics so that participants have conversational freedom
- ☐ If possible, have unrecorded sessions for discussions so students are not deterred by the idea of being permanently recorded
- ☐ Communities can consider and encourage intermediate steps for connection depending on members' level of comfort (e.g. start by using only the microphone then progress to turning on the camera)

START WITH SHARING

Communities usually start from common interests. Communities should gage their members' interests and implement discussions and activities that align with them.

- ☐ Within larger communities, provide smaller interest groups (e.g., Discord channels for specific interests)
- ☐ Create a space for members to share interesting opportunities outside of the community
- ☐ Carve out time during events for members to share their skills and hobbies (e.g. start off the meeting with mindful doodling and/or take a mid-meeting stretching break; both can be led by a community member)

PURPOSE UNITES PEOPLE

Interests can get communities started but to continue engaging students, they need a common purpose. These opportunities create unifying moments for students and build a cohesive environment.

- ☐ Provide members with both short-term and long-term goals they can mobilize around (e.g. for a club, a short-term goal may include creating a background guide for organizing club projects or activities, a long-term goal is to organize a university-wide conference by the end of the semester or school year)
- ☐ Highlight both the small and big wins of community members

- ☐ Introduce fun challenges to keep members engaged and encourage members to update others on the highs and lows of their progress (e.g., study for an hour with your phone off for an online study group, take a selfie with a dog on your next run for an online running community)

FOUNDATIONAL FLEXIBILITY

When communities are designed with flexibility in mind, they can provide opportunities for students to engage while also respecting boundaries. In this way, students can feel connected at times and embrace solitude at other times.

- ☐ Provide a variety of choices for engagement including both asynchronous and synchronous forms
- ☐ Be cognizant of different schedules and time zones, and provide events at different times throughout the week

- ☐ Establish clear entry points and provide contact information for any questions to make joining the community as easy and accessible as possible
- ☐ Allow students to try-out communities and find a best fit before they commit

INCLUDING STUDENT VOICES

Communities encourage engagement and growth by valuing student voices and creating opportunities for feedback.

- ☐ Give plenty of opportunities for students to give their input in a variety of forms including anonymously and in open-forums with community leaders
- ☐ Spend time trying to incorporate the feedback into the way communities are structured and created.

- ☐ Give members the opportunity to engage in leadership roles (e.g., in a student club/organization allow the other members of your team to lead a meeting, find out what members are passionate about and let them lead a class or session)
- ☐ Allow members to weigh in or vote on important decisions

CULTIVATING SELF-AWARENESS

When students have a better understanding of what they need and what they crave, it will help them make sense of the confusion and anxiety that come with the pandemic and online learning. This understanding of themselves will help keep them grounded and empower them to find communities that meet their specific needs.

- ☐ Encourage reflection/engage students in reflective activities
- ☐ Include a clear description and objectives of the community in order to allow members to assess whether the community is a good fit and can meet their needs

- ☐ Have a variety of options for engagement so that students can discover and the best medians for themselves

CONTRIBUTORS

Ayaan Hagar, Design Research Team Lead, Bachelor of Information
Mona Adib-Moradi Langroudi, Data Analysis Researcher, Doctor of Dental Surgery
Kethmi Egodage, Data Analysis Researcher, Bachelor of Criminology, Bachelor of Psychology
Sanskriti Maheshwari, Data Analysis Researcher, Bachelor of Criminology, Bachelor of Psychology
Kaitlyn Corlett, Senior Research Assistant, Master of Education
Johanna Pokorny, Senior Research Assistant, Ph.D., Socio-cultural Anthropology

DESIGNED BY
Sophia Kurtz, Digital Storyteller, Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering
Cody Foo, Digital Storyteller, Master of Information, UX Design
Ecem Sungur, Communications Specialist, Bachelor of Architecture

For more information, or to work with the Innovation Hub,
please contact **Julia Allworth** at **julia.allworth@utoronto.ca**
or **416-978-8619**, or visit our blog at **uoft.me/innovationhub**