Design for Learning
21st Century Online Teaching and Learning
Skills for Library Workers

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In Partnership With

Design for Learning 4 - Community

Case Studies of Online Learning Communities

This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Grant Project #RE-06-14-0014-14.

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Introduction

I've approached several different people involved in managing online learning communities to ask them the same set of questions about their communities.

While I've placed this in week 1, there's a lot of content for this week, so please return to this as you have time throughout the remaining weeks of the module.
#critlib

These answers were provided by Jenna Freedman, one of the co-creators and co-moderators of the #critlib community and the Associate Director of Communications & Zine Librarian at the Barnard College Library.

For people who aren’t familiar with this community, where should they explore to find out more about it?

Thanks for starting off with an easy question! Go to the about page (http://critlib.org/about/) of our website (http://critlib.org/).

What are a few of the most interesting features of this community?

I think in librarianship there's an assumption that most of us in the profession are politically and culturally liberal. #critlib is one of the places in librarianship where neoliberalism is assumed--and problematized.

Despite the fact that the point of our existence is being critical, I think it's important to mention that we work hard to be hospitable, supportive, and welcoming. We also turn our critical eye upon ourselves.

What’s it like to participate in this community?

This might be a better question for participants not involved in our small group of "leaders." I scare quoted "leaders" because we’re really more like organizers or a clearing house at this point. It may sound hokey or disingenuous, but the group is both leaderful and leaderless. Leaderful, because anyone can volunteer to lead one of our biweekly chats.

But getting back to the question, speaking only for myself--It's fun and informative, inspiring, and great for getting to internet-know people whose work you admire. The chats themselves are--and this may sound ridiculous--blood pumping because they go so fast. I usually have three Twitter tabs open, one for live #critlib posts, one for notifications, and one for messages. I'll have the blog post with the questions in another tab. There's a lot of fast processing, liking, and trying to figure out how to say what you want to say within the character limit.

To be honest, there are times when I wish the chats allowed for more reflection, which is why it's nice that there are in-person events, as well. We--and when I say "we," I mean different people and groups organizing events, some with the core moderators, some not--held an unconference before the 2015 ACRL conference (http://critlib2015.weebly.com/), where we got to spend a whole day talking face-to-face. Another group has a two-day theory workshop scheduled for December 2016 (http://criticallibrarianshipworkshop.weebly.com/) that should allow for deeper discussions than can be had on Twitter.
What I'm saying is, and I hope this is true, participating in the community is whatever the participants make it. There isn't one monolithic body making stuff happen, people just get together and do cool stuff.

**What do participants put into it?**

At a minimum, they follow the chats, which happen every other week. They alternate between Monday during the day and Tuesday evenings (North America-ly speaking). It's nice when a wide variety of folks feel inspired or empowered to respond to the questions posted by the session's moderator or respond to other responses. It's very nice when a wide variety of folks feel inspired or empowered to moderate sessions. People can participate by attending or coordinating conferences or meetups as I mentioned in the previous question. There's a map on our website [https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=zKk2VkABHI0.k86U88HheemE](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=zKk2VkABHI0.k86U88HheemE) if people want to find local #critlib-bers.

**What do they get out of it?**

Again, I can't speak for everyone, so I'll just say what I get out of it. I get to dedicate two hours a month to thinking critically about librarianship on different topics, some I know something about, and some that are new to me. I get to interact with smart, interesting people, some of whom I know, and some who are new to me.

The chats and face-to-face events inform my practice--how I teach, how I interact with colleagues, how I think about cataloging--really every aspect of librarianship AND LIFE. :) I've also learned more about critical theory than I did in my undergraduate theater major and LIS degree.

**How did this community get started? What kind of steps were involved?**

Nicole Pagowsky ([http://nicolepagowsky.info/](http://nicolepagowsky.info/)) thought it up and reached out to people she wanted to work with. She/we followed protocols already standard in Twitter chats, notably #libchat ([http://hacklibraryschool.com/2011/03/15/libchat/](http://hacklibraryschool.com/2011/03/15/libchat/)).

**What do/did you do to maintain this community? What kind of issues do/did you have to troubleshoot?**

We take turns administering chat topic proposals (which Violet Fox ([https://twitter.com/violetbfox](https://twitter.com/violetbfox)) has been doing this whole academic year and designing, updating, and maintaining our website, so thank you, Violet!), and we show up to the chats as often as we can. When I am on a chat, I feel responsible for making sure the chat moderator feels supported and that people don't get into attacking each other. That hasn't happened in any significant way, but it is something I'm thinking about when I'm participating.
What other advice can you offer about online learning communities?

Have women and people of color involved in the leadership. Consider how privilege informs dynamics in your community and take steps to protect and empower participants from marginalized groups. When things get tense, or just for fun, encourage people to post photos of baby animals (including humans, if that's what they're into).
Omeka forums

These answers were provided by Megan Brett, a PhD student in the Department of History and Art History at George Mason University and a research assistant at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, where she’s part of the team that manages the forums for Omeka.org.

For people who aren’t familiar with this community, where should they explore to find out more about it?

To learn more about Omeka in general, go to Omeka.org and look at the About page and some of the top pages of the documentation (omeka.org/codex).

To learn more about the Omeka community, check out the Forums (http://omeka.org/forums/) and the Developer Google Group (https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/omeka-dev).

Many members of the Omeka community are also active on twitter, and will either tag omeka with @omeka (the official account) or use #omeka when talking about using the system, asking questions, or sharing their projects.

What are a few of the most interesting features of this community?

There is a very broad range of people involved in the community, from those just getting started with digital work to professional developers who modify Omeka’s code and build their own themes and plugins. It includes the members of the Omeka development team at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, but many of the people answering questions online are volunteers who help others because they enjoy working with Omeka.

We recently conducted a survey of our developers to get a sense of where they are and what training they have (or have not had): http://omeka.org/blog/2016/03/03/omeka-developers-are-all-over-the-map-in-more-ways-than-one/

What’s it like to participate in this community?

This is a hard question to answer because we are the maintainers of the open-source project, so our experience is going to be different from an end user, a beginning developer, a developer for hire, or a power user.

That said, I would say that there’s always something new to learn, and that I really enjoy seeing what people are trying to do with Omeka. It is only frustrating when there’s a language barrier - either spoken language or textual - which interferes with the ability of two people to communicate just what a problem (or solution) might be. Those are instances when I wish we
could see each other’s machines. However, those moments are rare, and almost always work out.

**What do participants put into it?**

People participate by building and sharing Omeka sites, helping each other on the forums and on twitter, and by contributing new or adapted add-ons for Omeka on GitHub. In other words: time, expertise, and ideas.

**What do they get out of it?**

Because the community supports each other, people have the opportunity to teach as well as the learn. We have people all over the world, so at almost any time of day there is someone available to answer questions.

I think we all enjoy the wide range of projects people build with Omeka. Together we expand the theoretical and practical boundaries of what you can do with Omeka.

**How did this community get started?**

It started as a way to offer help for users of Omeka, and as a way for us to communicate with them about changes to the system.

**What kind of steps were involved?**

Deciding which systems to use for the general help forum and developer community. We are actually talking about moving to a new forum software system because the platform we chose has gotten unwieldy and is sometimes hard to manage.

**What do/did you do to maintain this community?**

We delete spam comments and posts, and answer questions according to our various expertises.

**What kind of issues do/did you have to troubleshoot?**

Because we have a number of places where people can ask for help, we sometimes get people asking in multiple places at once - without giving one space a chance to give an answer. We do also get spammers but those are easy to deal with. Thankfully our community tends to be respectful and helpful with each other, so we do not have to do much work moderating.

**What other advice can you offer about online learning communities?**

If you are interested in collaborative online learning, looking at our and others’ open-source software development communities is a good idea.
Massachusetts Studies Network

These answers were provided by Joanne Riley, the University Archivist and Curator of Special Collections at the Joseph P. Healey Library, University of Massachusetts Boston.

For people who aren’t familiar with this community, where should they explore to find out more about it?

The community site itself, http://mastudies.ning.com

What are a few of the most interesting features of this community?

This site was founded to explore – way back in 2007! – whether humanities professionals (at the time a not very social media-savvy crowd) were interested in participating in an online professional community.

What’s it like to participate in this community?

Activity in this community waxes and wanes in direct proportion to the amount of attention given to it by its administrators.

What do participants put into it?

Very low key – they can do whatever they like – start an interest group or a discussion, add events, notes, photos, comments on others’ profile pages.

What do they get out of it?

Networking connections with others in the humanities and cultural heritage fields.

How did this community get started?

As an experiment that we wanted to try here at UMass Boston to see whether humanities and cultural heritage professionals were interested in participating in an online professional community. This was back when Facebook was just getting going, and most adults and many cultural heritage professionals, were extremely hesitant about using social networks for their work. One thing we did that helped was that I laboriously changed the back-end language on the NING platform so that “friend” became “colleague” and “blogs” became “journals”, etc – that made many members more comfortable, to ask someone they knew professionally to be their “colleague” instead of their “friend.” See the grant proposal attached for much more specific information about the goals and objectives of the network.

What kind of steps were involved?
We wrote a grant proposal to the NEH, which was funded, and then put out a call for members and got a wonderful response. The network now has 708 members, although new memberships have dropped off.

**What do/did you do to maintain this community?**

In the beginning we were very active in administering the community, but that has fallen off considerably in more recent years, particularly since everybody in the world got comfortable with participating in social networks via Facebook!

**What kind of issues do/did you have to troubleshoot?**

Lost passwords and spammers. Other than that, the community was very cordial, collegial and civil.

**What other advice can you offer about online learning communities?**

They need care and feeding! A welcoming administrative presence makes a huge difference in encouraging participation.
Renaissance Island on Second Life

These answers were provided by Mary-Carol Lindbloom, our very own Project Director for D4L, and the Executive Director of the South Central Regional Library Council.

For people who aren’t familiar with this community, where should they explore to find out more about it?

I am going to discuss the Renaissance Island learning community a.k.a. the Parish of Reading Primley, which is located in the 3D virtual world of Second Life. Second Life is a persistent virtual world, which means that when you log off, the buildings and everything else--including other people who may be inworld as avatars (their online representation), are still there. http://www.secondlife.com contains much information regarding the platform. Once inworld, you can search for places and find us under Renaissance Island.

What are a few of the most interesting features of this community?

It is one of the few educational areas in SL that combines learning with role play. There are villagers who rent cottages or stores and there are educational events including plays at the Globe Theatre, monthly early music concerts, storytelling, book discussions, and sometimes guest lectures. There is also en garde, jousting, and the new favorite, lawn chess. We've had faires and a few years ago, a cross-disciplinary conference. Second Life has taken a lot of grief over the years and then when the media moved on to the Next Big Thing, some people thought of SL as a "has-been." Tell that to the million people who still log in! I like that I can be part of the Renaissance Island community but then skip over to my favorite progressive rock club (have many international friends there) or even go to church if I am so inclined. Sometimes I hang out in a couple of other educational or historic builds. It's all just there--I don't have to load another program to visit those places.

What’s it like to participate in this community?

Unlike some of the sims in Second Life, we do not insist that people be attired in 16th century garb, though pretty-much everyone who is there does so. Some try to talk in the version of English spoken at the time. Inworld as other places, our representations are called "avatars." There is a growing body of research on identity in virtual environments. Identity is the way you look, act, and even what you call yourself. In Second Life, it is now possible to float your real world name over your avatar, but we had to choose surnames generated by the platform. Inworld, I am Korrigan Keynes (pronounced "cains"). Our manager sometimes appears as a horse. It's really not fair--it gives her an advantage for all of the steeple chases, hahaha! In most other learning communities, identity may not be quite as consuming as in SL. What I mean by that is that you can look any way you want--though some sociologists suggest that many of us tend to create our perfect selves. On the other hand, at least one 30-something colleague prefers to be 90-something in Second Life.
What do participants put into it?

Their time and expertise--and sometimes money. Some create buildings, clothing, and even animals while others host events or perform management functions. For years some librarians have answered reference questions--those pertaining to functionality of SL and real-world questions.

What do they get out of it?

It is probably different for everyone, but I would say the feeling of community and satisfaction that comes from creating things and helping others. There is a book by Frans Johansson called the Medici Effect. It is a book about intersections and the innovation that happens when different disciplines do that. SL is full of creative people from different professions and a place replete with such things. I also like networking with other educators and librarians from around the world. One time a Danish medievalist built a display and hosted an event. Educators and librarians usually let you know who they are in the real world.

How did this community get started?

With the Alliance Library System, which had been one of nine multi-type systems in Illinois until a few years ago. They wanted to explore the feasibility of developing a world as a learning community and library. It’s fine to build a library and set up a virtual desk, but Ren was an experiment whereby the entire sim became a wiki and opportunity to learn and participate....to build community.

What kind of steps were involved?

We had to assemble a team to lend ideas and expertise. Eventually we developed a full-fledged business plan. Groups form, storm, norm, and perform--I think we’re in the latter two phases but we certainly went through all of them!

What do/did you do to maintain this community?

After the Alliance Library System, South Central Regional Library Council became the sponsor of the sim, as a non-profit. The residents who live there generally raise the funds to maintain it. But the most important aspect of maintaining this community is to have a "boots on the ground" manager. Ren is incredibly fortunate to have a volunteer manager who is there most days. You have to have someone there, and there have to be things for residents to do. That is why we have events, both role playing and educational--and just plain fun. You have to build relationships and make it a place people want to engage with.

What kind of issues do/did you have to troubleshoot?

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Sometimes it can be as simple as helping a resident to open their inventory - especially if they are new to Second Life. Other times there may be an issue with the sim and we have to do what is called a "roll back" - a return to a time before things went haywire. The more challenging issues involve negotiating problems between people. SL attracts incredibly creative people and sometimes there ideas may clash. We also have experienced what they call "griefing" - residents (not of Ren but SL in general) that may breeze into an event just to disrupt it. Those are annoying issues. This past year we had a zombie problem. Indeed, someone planted zombies in the sea and spread them across three different sims so that no one sim could return them. This is one time when Linden Lab was not responsive. They are still there--our manager isolated them in their own parcel and now they cannot annoy theatre-goers with their horrible sounds. (-:  

**What other advice can you offer about online learning communities?**

Online communities, like any other, require constant attention. If you can't be there every day or much at all, make sure you have someone who can be. Another likeness with the real world is that you tend to get out of it what you put into it. In say, one of your real-world associations, do you just pay a membership fee or do you deeply engage? It is the same in a virtual learning community.

Here is a link to one of the machinima videos shot by a librarian that features the music of our first resident musician, Thom Dowd (Thomas Coard in real life). Generally we do not give our our real names--anonymity is taken very seriously by the Community Standards of Second Life. Like me, though, Thom did not separate his two lives. He was from the USA but taught at a music conservatory in Freiburg, SZ and streamed his real life concerts into SL. He passed away a few years ago in the real world and there is a marker for him in the churchyard, as there is for Dinnie, a librarian from Canada who also died a few years ago. You know that you are in a community when you grieve. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIXaL4RncFw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIXaL4RncFw)

Well, to end on a happy note....a couple of the cool things that have happened--Showtime premiered the first episodes of The Tudors on Ren and the choreographer of the horses for the Patriot movie did a talk for us.

The last word...... there is also a Second Life Education Discussion list. This is also where some of the librarian and educational innovators are. I truly hope that you will grab one of the avatars that Lori is developing for the class and hop inworld and join us for a tour and/or an event!
InfoQuest

These answers were provided by Lori Bell, our very own D4L instructor for the Content Creation Module, and Interim Special Projects Coordinator at the South Central Regional Library Council.

For people who aren’t familiar with this community, where should they explore to find out more about it? What are a few of the most interesting features of this community?

Infoquest is an example of an online community which did not work well and we had to give it up after one year. You can get more Infoquest info at http://infoquest.spruz.com. Infoquest is a mix of Jibe, virtual world software, and Unity, a game building software. It is a web-based world. We wanted to try it because with a web-based world, the learning curve for users is less than a virtual world with Second Life which requires its own “viewer” software and has a steep learning curve. A small group of librarians (5-6) committed to working with this project which started in November 2014. The problem was that all of these individuals were very busy with Second Life and other virtual worlds. They did not have the time to learn Jibe and Unity. Although Infoquest was easier for users, it was not easy for developers. There were not as many graphics etc. available as there were for Second Life. After much discussion, our group decided to turn the project over to Dr. John Jamison of Imagilearning who was familiar with the software and who had a project using the software.

What’s it like to participate in this community?

The graphics of Infoquest were outstanding and beautiful. We had several scenes developed by Reaction Grid. (See our website for pictures.) We also found a gentleman in the UK who had already created many scenes for games that he sold us. These are also on our website. We had a welcome scene, a library scene, and a conference center and exhibit area in one world. Other “worlds” that we had planned were Middle East, thirteenth century England, Medieval Marketplace, War of the Roses, Fortress, Urban Decay and Future Now. Our plan was to have a manager of each world, put up seating in the scene for book discussions and programs and to have book displays on that topic. So that every manager did not have to learn Unity and Jibe and pay for a license which was somewhat expensive, we bought what Reaction Grid calls Aces Boards which one can put in a scene then upload a graphic to it. We set up 25-50 Aces boards into each world for this purpose.

What do participants put into it?

Several librarians created beautiful displays using Aces boards in the conference and exhibit area. One graduate student put the website together, put tutorials together and learned how to use Jibe and Unity. Others were going to learn to use this software but just did not have time with other projects they were working on.

What do they get out of it?
We were hoping to get a community of librarians and educators together to enjoy continuing education, programs, and networking. We just did not generate enough interest to form a working community and we had too many challenges and problems in getting the project off the ground.

**How did this community get started?**

This community started with the group of 4-5 librarians who wanted to investigate a web-based world which was easier for users than the steep learning curve of Second Life.

**What kind of steps were involved?**

We contracted with Reaction Grid and they built the first world. We bought the other worlds/environments from Arteria 3d.

**What do/did you do to maintain this community?**

We tried to get interest from librarians and educators, thinking we might get the same interest and collaboration as we did with Second Life. We just did not get that interest and with such projects, you have to have community and collaboration.

**What kind of issues do/did you have to troubleshoot?**

We had a number of issues to troubleshoot-

1. The software uses Vivox for voice. The software was troublesome and rarely worked.
2. We tried to create too many worlds. We should have concentrated on a few instead of as many as we did.
3. After a year we did not have enough interest to continue.
4. Worlds in Jibe are not connected as they are in Second Life. Most of them are private and we did not get to see a lot of examples of Jibe worlds. We also did not have the huge number of users that Second Life has with these connections.
5. Not as many people are as familiar with Jibe and Unity and every time we had a training session, we had to pay. The learning curve for developers was high.
6. The staff at Reaction Grid, the company we worked with, was very small. They tried to be responsive but they only had 3-4 staff members.
7. Jibe worlds are published as Unity webplayer files read by browsers. Now only Firefox supports the Unity player. Firefox will end support if it has not already.
8. Users could not build on the fly as they can in Second Life. They have to use Unity to create a “scene” or world” then combine that with Jibe and upload it.
9. There were approximately 10 avatars to choose from. They could not be customized except in some of the clothes they were wearing. In other virtual worlds, avatars are an important digital representation of oneself and some people go into a lot of detail with these avatars.
What other advice can you offer about online learning communities?

- Plan, plan, plan
- Start small and make sure you can support your online community
- Spend lots of time with the company you are working with to plan and to see what their costs are for training, development, etc.
- If possible, get an expert on the community who will help you know when something is not working and realize it is a learning experience.
- Make sure you have several technical people willing to learn the software and provide support.
- Make sure you have enough people for a successful community