From Offline to Online Community Engagement for PVE

Considerations for Designing Virtual Activities

The move towards engaging people and communities in online spaces, recently necessitated and expanded by the Covid-19 pandemic, has both opened up new opportunities and challenges for PVE practitioners: Which considerations should you make when bringing community engagement processes and practices online? How do you design a process which supports participation, captures your community and supports your PVE objectives?

It all starts with acknowledging that online and offline are *not* the same. Our experiences in physical environments are shaped by elements we often take for granted, but become apparent when we 'lose' or 'miss' them when engaging in social interactions online. Here are some examples:

- Touch and physical presence of others in the room
- A shared experience of a setting (sound, smell, proximity, buzz, energy of a room)
- Visibility - literally being seen by others
- Spontaneous peripheral encounters - those natural, casual, social interactions that happen in a break or in a hallway
- Implicit norms and expectations that come with the physical space - for example the set-up of tables and chairs in a room

These are significant losses when moving to online spaces. This implies that you cannot directly transpose activities from an offline to an online setting. The trick is to take these elements into consideration and consciously and intentionally *reconstruct* them in an online environment.

Do you lose the opportunity for participants to informally catch up in the hallway before an online training starts? If so, then dedicate necessary time at the start of every online session for casual and personal check-ins.

So, the first consideration when shifting to online modes of community engagement for PVE therefore is to accept that you cannot directly transpose activities from an offline to an online setting; You need to purposefully and intentionally design your activity for online community engagement for PVE.

You cannot directly transpose activities from an offline to an online setting. You need to purposefully and intentionally design online community engagement.

Setting realistic expectations is always key in project or activity design. For Online Community Engagement Activities (OCEAs) you need to set and manage your expectations differently than when you would engage your community offline. One thing to consider, for example, is that doing things online generally takes more time. This stemms for a large part from losing those important physical aspects and their implications for social interactions as described previously and the consequential need to 'do things more explicitly' in online spaces.

Setting realistic expectations for your OCEA; online often takes more time.

➔ Online communication often takes longer - whether this refers to knowledge transfer, free flowing discussions or giving instructions.
➔ Trust-building takes longer online - People may engage in online activities at the start with scepticism or even a level of mistrust of the digital tools at hand. They need to get comfortable with the virtual environment, as well as with fellow participants. Because you miss spontaneous peripheral encounters and implicit norms, they need to be organised and made explicit. This costs time.
➔ Quality collaborative work can take longer to achieve online - People need to get comfortable with digital tools to use and group-building takes more time.

How can you mitigate the above? Manage expectations (both for participants as organisers of OCEAs) and be generous with time in your design/plan.

Like any other project design, your online activity for PVE needs to be a good fit with the community(ies) you intend to engage. It is therefore key to know the target audience's digital literacy, how they engage with, and relate to, digital tools, the internet and new media technologies.

Assess the digital literacy and technical needs of the target community(ies) to accommodate accessibility needs and to reduce or overcome a 'digital divide'.

Whether the target audience predominantly access the internet with mobile devices or laptops should for example directly inform your choice of platform or application when inviting them in your OCEA.

Moreover there are ways to accommodate accessibility needs and to overcome or reduce challenges from what can be called 'digital divide'. This involves designing to meet the economic and technical needs of a target group(s). Does your OCEA need to accommodate participants with low bandwidth for example?

Design, Plan and Structure

When designing OCEA you need to think of how to plan, create and structure 'online spaces of interaction', i.e. the moments when participants engage with each other and/or the OCEA in general. One important decision to make is to decide whether these interactions take place synchronously or asynchronously. **Synchronous** interactions refer to activities taking place with participants at a specific time and space, live, and direct. An example of a synchronous online interaction is a group meeting on a videoconferencing platform, like zoom or teams. **Asynchronous** engagement happens at one's own time and pace, is indirect and recorded or registered. Examples of asynchronous online interactions are interactions on discussion forums, on social media, or by sending voice messages or uploading videos. For greater impact and quality engagement in your OCEA, it is advised to include both synchronous and asynchronous activities. This can be as simple as organising multiple online live group meetings and sending follow up emails to nudge participants and keep them engaged. Another example would be for participants to asynchronously go through specific subject related materials and respond to discussion questions in preparation to a live online dialogue session.

When you combine asynchronous and synchronous techniques, you are actually creating opportunities for more consistent engagement as well as for repetition and nudging. When asynchronous and synchronous interactions reinforce each other you deepen the impact of the interactions and thus increase the impact of your OCEA.

Combine synchronous and asynchronous online activities to enhance the levels of engagement and impact of your OCEA.

Apart from the positive impact of a combined synchronous and asynchronous approach, the quality and impact of your OCEA is greatly affected by its length and duration. The amount of time a group spends interacting with each other will also affect how certain exchanges, learning or activities take place. Especially when quality collaboration, trust or in-depth learning is required, time is necessary and should be used as an instrument in your design. Building authentic connections, group formation processes, or safe (brave) spaces doesn't happen overnight, or in this context, over one live interaction. Quality engagement takes place over multiple interactions stretched over a certain duration. This is not different for online engagement.

Quality engagement online takes place over multiple interactions planned over a stretched period of time.

Our advice/best practice: keep online group meetings between 2-4 hours. They can be planned multiple times a week, depending on availability and needs of your target audience.

We have to talk about the size and scale. Deep and constructive levels of engagement won't be fostered in large online group meetings, like webinars, open discussion fora or sociale media groups. Although these are great for reaching out to audiences, your OCEA should aim for higher quality of interactions and sustained engagement (more on this under 'Process Matters').

Structure your ideal 'engagement pod'.

In our experience, we find that an ideal 'engagement pod' for deep learning and quality engagement consists of between 7-12 participants. Now, you may be used to engaging a lot more than 12 people in your usual practices. Luckily, online you can play with scale and make 120 participants feel like they are only taking part in intimate groups by creating 10 similar 'pods' with each 12 participants. You can also use breakout rooms in larger groups for specific activities to increase quality interactions and building of lasting connections.
What options do you have in your OCEA for customising your audience's experience of scale?

Process Matters

The effectiveness and impact of your OCEA depends very much on your ability to build trust, connections and relationships within your group. For OCEA for PVE to be meaningful, practitioners should be intentional, explicit and deliberate in its process. Before getting to the *how*, let's have a quick look at three reasons *why* relationship building is of particular relevance for *online* community engagement.

1. Individual Accountability
People tend to fall into the roles and expectations given to them and it's also human nature to take a passive role if that's available. Also, unlike in an offline setting - when we're in an online setting it can be easier to feel anonymous, even invisible sometimes. Encouraging active participants and maximising potential of participants is a way of countering this by design. This is done by intentionally creating exercises, opportunities and spaces for those involved to become more accountable.
Explicitly discussing expectations for participation, creating individual objectives, or discussing desired behaviour and commitment for participation are practical ways to support this. It will make participants feel like what they do counts; they will feel inherently valuable and will be more accountable for their actions.

2. Ownership.
Just like in offline group practices, ownership is about handing over control (over process) and responsibility to the group. to input creative ideas, learn from each other and feel part of a collective. These horizontal relationships are at risk of being lost in OCEA but finding ways to give ownership to participants as a group, transforms the experience from a static to a dynamic one.

3. Sources of Knowledge

Alongside accountability and ownership, building relationships at its foundation, rests on valuing individuals as sources of embodied or place-based knowledge. Participants, or community members are 'experts of their own experiences', and should inherently feel valued because of this.

Essentially what each of these three components aim to do is to increase the investment of participants in the OCEA. If you make participants feel inherently valuable, they will be more likely to commit and make a personal investment in both their personal experience of the OCEA as to the group's . This benefits both individual and collective development.
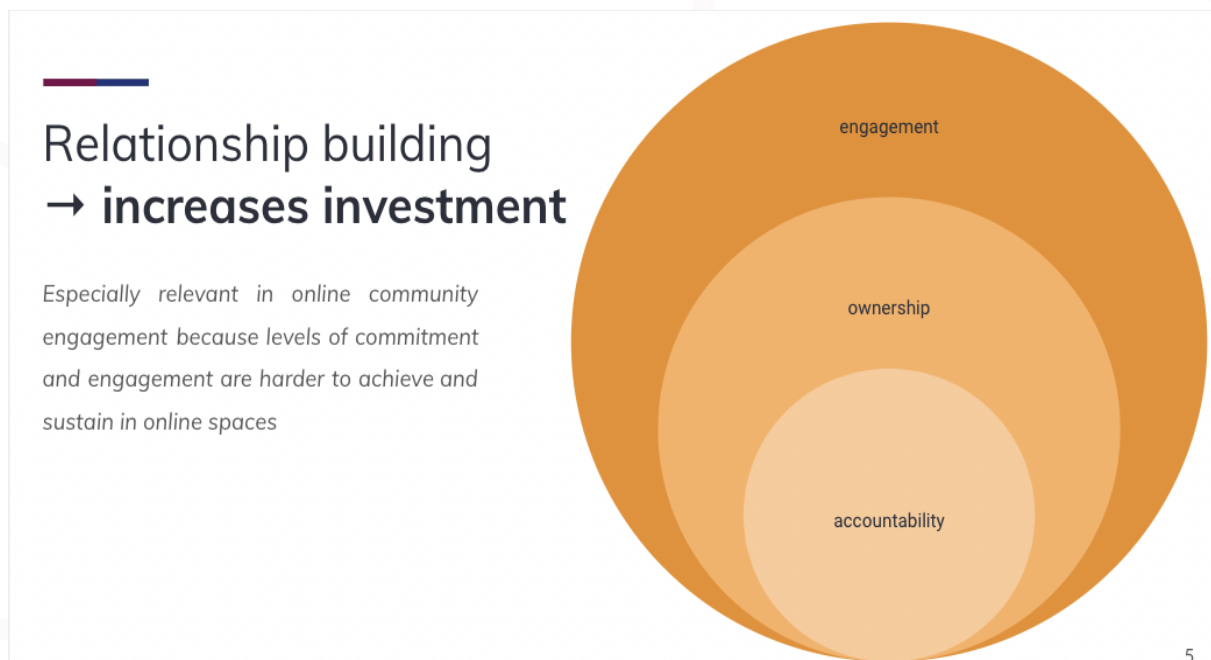

Fig 1. Increasing investment of participants in OCEA through relationship building

Continue reading how to design for, and facilitate relationship building in OCEA, and to embed this in a bigger structure of a group process framework.

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