

Promoting Active Participation & Ownership in Online Spaces

Facilitation Online Community Engagement

A common facilitation challenge when working with groups in online environments is how to handle participants or even whole groups that are not taking part actively or show disengagement with the activity. In virtual groups this can be reflected for example by passive participation in activities, low retention and continued engagement, or political correctness in discussions.

Luckily, there are different facilitation techniques and tools to manage disengaged participants and groups, as well as proactive approaches to promote active participation through design and preparation.

Effective Group Dynamics Online

Promoting active participation and (group) ownership in online environments starts with building effective group dynamics.

Imagine you are a facilitator involved in an online community engagement activity. What would the ideal group to work with look like? How would they interact with each other, or with you as the facilitator? What about their behaviour during the activity in general?



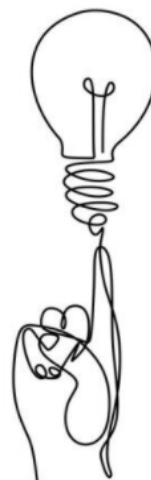
There is a fair chance that your 'ideal group' includes some of the following characteristics:

- Participants show interest in each other, ask each other questions and share about themselves
- They join the session on time and if relevant, have done sufficient preparations
- Participants are enthusiastic and energized and seem to be comfortable in the online space
- Participants take ownership of the discussion. They see themselves as the leaders of the dialogue and progress through discussions on their own, without requiring prompting from the facilitator
- Participants feel comfortable being vulnerable with the group. They have no problems sharing difficult personal experiences, or expressing opinions that might be unpopular
- Participants have developed an understanding of what is good communication and listening. They demonstrate these skills, and bring attention to them if they think the group isn't meeting that standard
- Participants have moved from having shallow conversations to deep conversations in which they engage with the feelings, beliefs, experiences and assumptions that underlie their viewpoints on the topic. They demonstrate critical thinking, and a willingness to engage with difference
- Participants have moved from being strangers or having social barriers to having developed strong connections with each other that overcome conflicts or prejudice

The points above are all signs of an engaged group with healthy, constructive group dynamics. As a facilitator or organizer of an OCEA, you can work towards creating the right environment for a group to develop (or strengthen) these positive group dynamics. In doing so, you are proactively countering disengagement and other challenges with participation.

There are three core components that contribute to building effective group dynamics online:

1. Encouraging group ownership
1. Constructive group environment
2. Relationship building



Encouraging Group Ownership

Group ownership means that participants freely contribute, are talkative and interact with each other. In many cases at the start of a group process participants rely on facilitators to lead conversations or activities. When group ownership increases over time, however, participants take the lead, ask fellow group members questions and provide input for the activity.

There are various ways to promote group ownership. Right from the start it is important to encourage groups to reflect on how they want and expect each other to behave in their online environment. In this context, norm setting and explicitly discussing expectations and goals for the group are very beneficial for their sense of ownership. Here are two ideas of how to go about this:

1. Host a free-flowing discussion. Let learners discuss and decide the principles they think are important for their group meetings. Which norms and practices do they want to use and hold each other accountable for?
2. Take a discussion of 'ground rules' further by letting participants (co-)create a code of conduct or group contract. Making this an interactive activity encourages ownership by asking the participants to create their own framework of conduct; it helps everyone to know what is expected of them in advance. This means that common issues are proactively addressed before they arise, rather than responded to as they emerge. It also enables groups to come up with positive and supportive solutions to help each other navigate group sessions.

As a facilitator you should be clear about your role and what the group can expect from you; explicitly mention that they are encouraged to take ownership of the process. You should also encourage group members to ask one another questions and make observations. At the start of the group process, facilitators can model curiosity and question asking so that the group will feel

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Encouraging group ownership

- Norm setting, expectations, goals
 - Be explicit
 - Discuss group 'rules' or create 'contract'
- Encourage curiosity and question asking
 - Positive feedback
 - Model behaviour
 - 'Forum for Stupid Questions'
 - Give groups time to think and formulate
- When group is not taking ownership
 - Observe, reflect, meta conversations
 - Using silence
 - Take a step-back

Building effective group dynamics online

comfortable in taking this up themselves.

Foster a Constructive Group Environment

A constructive group environment is a safe space, where participants feel they can speak freely, are being heard and feel connected to each other. As a facilitator you should invest in creating a sense of safety and promoting a group feeling in the virtual space. You do this, for example, by using a friendly and welcoming tone of voice and non-verbal communication. Another way to enhance the group feeling is to drive activities and conversations towards personal experiences and sharing of individual perspectives.

Ultimately, as a facilitator one of your main tasks is to discern power dynamics in a group, and to not disrupt the sense of safety and group cohesion. If an objective of your OCEA is to foster learning, it is important to go beyond creating a safe space. You want to hit the sweet spot where people feel safe and secure within their online space and group, but are also able to feel challenged and experience a level of discomfort. Deep learning and transformation happens in that place a little bit outside of your comfort zone.

SHARING PERSPECTIVES FOUNDATION

Foster constructive group environment

- Creating sense of safety and promoting a 'group feeling'
- Discern power dynamics
- Create a safe space balanced with a level of discomfort

- Encourage/enforce using video
- Model welcoming, friendly (non/)verbal communication
- Drive discussions towards the personal
- Explicitly acknowledge and address power dynamics
- Different interventions depending on nature of dynamic
- Learning through difference and conflict

Building effective group dynamics online

Relationship Building

A group needs to reach a certain level of comfort before they can get into in-depth discussions, an exchanging of ideas, deep-learning, or collaboration. Whatever type of group you may have on your hands, through relationship building groups establish trust, increased commitment, and investment in the process. More on the importance of relationship building in OCEA can be read under '[Process Matters](#)'.

As an organizer or facilitator of OCEAs there are some things to do consistently to foster relationship and connection building in an online group:

- Plan and design online meetings with time for informal interaction. For example, through having some time at the start for check-ins or some chit-chat;
- Include icebreakers and fun activities, always! These pave the way for more deeper conversations or quality interactions;
- Use relationship-building activities and facilitate conversations that focus on personal sharing;
- Provide space for smaller group interactions through breakout rooms;
- Prepare and ask follow-up questions that get to a deeper level

Relationship building takes time, and you can expect that when doing this online it will take even more than you are used to in an offline form of community engagement. When you feel frustrated or disappointed with the pace or 'quality' of connections that are formed in an OCEA, check in with your own expectations and assumptions about inter-group relations. You might need to temper your expectations, or reassess what you can achieve with your group.

In the end, constantly investing in relationship building in OCEA will have a positive impact on the quality of the engagement.

SHARING PERSPECTIVES FOUNDATION

Relationship building

- By design and planning**
 - Multiple meetings; sustained period of time
 - Online session of 2-4 hours
 - Semi-structured session design
- Encourage personal sharing**
 - Ice-breakers and activities
 - Use break-out rooms
 - Drive discussions towards the personal
- When group is not building relationships as expected**
 - Check (and adjust) your expectations
 - Have fun!

Building effective group dynamics online

Signs of Disengaged Groups and Responsive Facilitation

There are three very common dynamics or situations that occur in online groups that could signal a lack of engagement in groups or individual participants. It is important for a facilitator to assess the dynamic correctly and in a timely manner, and respond aptly before it gets too challenging for the process and negatively impacts the OCEA.

It is important to note that every group is different and these situations are not always an immediate 'proof' that a group is not involved or liking the activity. Observing and assessing the situation is key, as you do not want to jump to conclusions.

Silence in Online Groups

We have all experienced, whether as a participant or a facilitator of an online meeting, that silence when a group of people is asked a question and everyone is just looking at their screen rather than raising their voice. Although frustrating and sometimes even awkward, silence does not necessarily indicate a negative dynamic; on the contrary it might be constructive and needed. Silence can mean that participants are processing or thinking, or a useful cue to facilitators that they are ready to move on from a topic.

Facilitators should allow for silent moments that drive the group to some discomfort which can motivate participants to step in. However, continuing silence can be a sign of a lack of engagement by a group. How can you assess whether you're dealing with constructive silence or if silence is a sign of disengagement?

- Check in with individual participants. A wonderful digital tool at hand in most (video-)conferencing platforms is the function to send a direct message to individual participants. Use this when you are noticing a specific participant is more quiet than you are used to or more quiet than others. You may find out that the person has something that is preventing them from participating actively at that moment, for example they might have an important deadline coming up or they might not feel well. You could also learn that they are more comfortable listening and feel shy or insecure about sharing their thoughts. If this is the case, make sure to encourage them to voice their perspectives. Stress that you and the group value the thoughts of the individual as much as those of the others, and potentially give them space to do so by calling on them or specifically asking for their responses.
- Check in with the group. By observing and naming the dynamic as a facilitator, you can open a conversation to better understand what is driving a certain dynamic and learn about the group's needs. This can sound like "I am noticing that my questions are met with quite some silence today. Have you also noticed this? How do you feel about this?" or "is this something that we need to address?" This should lead to a meta-conversation about the space and activity that participants are engaging in and encouraging their ownership of this experience. You can ask for direct feedback on what you as their facilitator could do to improve their experience. Don't be surprised if the group is actually not experiencing these silences as awkward or frustrating, however; many times people are just warming up or gathering their thoughts, and need a moment before stepping in.

Once you have established whether silence is due to a group that lacks expected or needed engagement, you can use different facilitation interventions to see if you can encourage active participation. For example:

- ★ 'Hearing from everyone:' Specify to the group that with this question or topic, you would like to hear everyone's thoughts. You can call out the names of each of the participants and give them space to answer, or ask group members to select who goes after they have contributed.
- ★ Allow space for fun topics and activities. Always have energizers or more light hearted activities at hand to pick up the pace of a meeting, activate the group, and break the ice.
- ★ Give positive feedback. Highlight the groundwork the group has laid for successful collaboration, and the diverse assets within the group that can be utilized.

Body Language and Social Cues

In offline settings, you assess participants' and groups' needs by looking for social cues and body language. This is no different when engaging with communities online using video tools. It might just take a bit more practice to do so online while multitasking digital tools and tech. Look at the group on your screen; Are people slouching? Looking tired, or falling asleep? What is their reaction to anything that's being said? Do they respond slow or fast? Are they looking energized, leaning forward, and engaging in the conversation?

Some cues that you can train yourself to spot are:

- Sighing or yawning
- Posture
- Slow responses
- Seeming distracted - looking away from the screen/camera.

Do a check-in individually or with the whole group to see what their needs are and how to respond as a facilitator. You could be dealing with a group that is less energetic than you hoped, but that does not necessarily mean that they aren't having a positive experience in the OCEA. Maybe the time of the group meeting is at the end of a long day for participants, making it harder for them to show enthusiasm. Observe, check in, and foster a meta-conversation with the group about the best ways to go about this.

- ★ Use energizers or digital tools to increase interactive engagement - you can use a poll, multiple choice question or a quiz to increase the interaction and activate the group.
- ★ Change the facilitation approach - always have activities or questions at hand that approach the subject matter of your online group meeting from a different angle. In short, create a 'plan' which includes a 'plan B' or a variety of conversation starters. Alternatively, If you are being met with silence when you ask a question, reframe the question, or even the whole topic. Being flexible as a facilitator is key in responding to a group that lacks engagement, so do not think too long before changing your approach and potentially changing the plan/schedule that you had for the meeting.

Actively include the group in a change of plan, for example by giving them a multiple choice for activities to do, or ask the group how they want to approach a certain topic. Maybe they have great ideas for discussion questions or conversation starters.

Of course there are also cues that signal engagement from participants online. Obvious ones are smiling or laughing, but also practice noticing mirroring behaviour in the group, as people tend to mirror each other, either in facial expressions or body language, when they're engaged.

Extreme Politeness or Avoidance

Sometimes we have groups that are agreeing a lot, approving of other participants' views, refraining from sharing their thoughts freely (or sharing at all), and overall show avoidant behaviour, ie. not interacting with each other. Although this can be viewed as a sign that participants are mindful and respectful of each other, it can also regress into participants not engaging with the process and/or each other - and this is not what you want in your online community engagement.

As stated previously, you want to hit the sweet spot where people feel safe and secure within their online space and group, but feel challenged and motivated to also address more challenging subject matter; raising their perspectives honestly and authentically, including when this leads to disagreement.

One signal of this dynamic is when group members continuously agree with each other and do not share or argue their own thoughts. Take this example:

As a facilitator you had one participant, X, immediately respond to the opening question you posed. After that they stay silent. You ask another participant directly 'what do you think of X's opinion?' and they simply respond with 'I agree with X' followed by silence again. You then ask 'does anyone else want to respond to X?' and all you get is another participant also stating that they liked X's thoughts and agree. You observe through the body language of some group members that they are not activated. The conversation is falling flat.

You might read this and immediately start imagining how to lift the group up, change the pace, or other ways to intervene as a facilitator. Before you move to this, however, make sure to assess the dynamic and check in with your own expectation of the group process. Is the group really developing a dynamic of avoidance? Are they dancing around certain challenging or sensitive subject matter?

One explanation of this dynamic might be that the level of trust in the group is not (yet) high enough; maybe you want too much too fast. It might just be a matter of putting in time and effort into building relationships before the group starts opening up more and sharing authentic and maybe even controversial thoughts. Assessing the group stage you are expecting the group to be in could offer insights into the background of this group dynamic ([read more about this here](#)).

If you do believe the group has developed a tendency to avoid certain themes or even avoid interacting with each other, here are examples of how to manage this as a facilitator:

- ★ Focus on personal experiences. Sometimes participants have a hard time talking about sensitive issues because they are afraid of causing offense. One way to keep the conversation interesting, and to help make them feel safer, is to keep bringing the conversation back to the personal and explore what personal connections the participants have with the topic. Related to this, if you want to dive deeper, try 'pushing' participants to explore how their identity impacts the way they view and approach the world, and how they communicate with those with different perspectives.
- ★ Prepare controversial statements as conversation starters. - Use an anonymous poll asking whether participants agree or disagree with a controversial statement. This gives them the comfort to first think of their own position, before giving them the opportunity to share their opinion.
- ★ Present alternative or missing views. Bringing in missing points of view, eliciting the limitations of them as a group. and positioning them in a broader (societal) context helps groups to identify as a group while providing room to
- ★ Encourage participants to ask questions of each other. Rephrase and reframe questions, responses, and topics as needed.

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