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# BUILDING AN INTERNAL COMMUNITY FOR SOCIAL LEARNING

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# Introduction

In the book *Designing for Modern Learning*, authors Crystal Kadakia and Lisa M.D Owens identify three “learning touchpoints” that outline key places, times, and ways that learning occurs. One of these touchpoints, Social Learning, looks beyond formal, planned approaches and provides learners with a level of interaction with other people. In most face-to-face learning experiences, whether we design for it or not, social learning happens inherently.

Once the face-to-face experience ends, most learning professionals check off the proverbial “social learning” box, but modern learning doesn’t stop at the end of an event. In fact, social learning should be occurring before, during, and after a formalized social training event, and more specifically, in the modern learners’ moment of need, which are often unplanned and unintentional. While many of today’s social learning experiences are occurring informally outside of the classroom, in order to ensure truly transformative learning, modern Learning & Development professionals should grow the capability to intentionally build social learning-centered experiences.

## Why Learners Seek Social Learning

Kadakia and Owens share a broad notion of the social learning touchpoint, and urge Learning & Development professionals to look at social learning beyond just “being together.” Rather, professionals can design layers of social interaction based on why learners seek to learn through social means. Consider the following purposes modern learners say drive their reach out to others:

**Process Further** - Modern learners want to interact with other people because dialogue may help them learn

**Gain a Fuller Story** - They want to hear what others have to say on a topic and expand their perspective

**Validate the Experts** - They want to validate the experts’ information by gathering opinions and lived experiences from others.

**Generate New Learning** - Modern learners expand the pool of knowledge beyond what L&D may have intended through sharing and building on each other’s perspectives

**Contextualize Learning** - Modern learners reach out with their specific situations and seek insight on application in the moment from peers as well as from SMEs

**Build Their Platform** - They share their insights in order to help others, gain credibility, bring meaning to their work, drive their own engagement

# Goals: Develop a Social Learning Community

Though the most often form of social learning is face-to-face group interaction, that's not the only way. Often, it's clear that face-to-face interaction straddles the line between "social learning" and "formal learning" touchpoints, rather than truly promoting social learning. While face-to-face interactions can provide a social environment, the way the event is facilitated (lecture vs. activity based) will define which touchpoint it will fall within. Just bringing people together does not create a social learning environment, rather it's how people are interacting that elevates an experience from formal learning to social learning.

In a digital world, social learning happens in more ways, times, and places than ever before. It can be about getting perspective from the community by reading comments and recommendations about a course, blog, book, or video. Social learning can also be accomplished by creating an infrastructure to connect individuals with a question or problem to individuals who are likely to have an answer. It can happen through engaging in chats and emails, or picking up the phone to call someone or stop by their desk. Collaboration in the cloud is another way people learn socially - consider the wealth of document collaboration, mind map creation, whiteboarding, and other generative learning tools there are today.

If face-to-face events don't always provide the meaningful interactions that modern learners seek as outlined above, how can we intentionally invite social learning into organizations in a way that includes many of these purposes?

Answer: Develop a Social Learning Community.

# What Is A Social Learning Community?

*a space to share, interact, learn, and expand*

Communities are not a new concept. Offline, informal communities form organically and can involve structures like a regular cadence of meetings or a focus on particular activities. As digital technology emerged, the need for community also arose.

Whereas early on, digital technology was primarily served as an information repository and one-way platforms for business, it quickly evolved to include social media platforms and two-way dialogue between people.

Social Learning communities are a subset of communities in general.

When a community is focused on and designed for learning activities, it's now a Social Learning Community. Rather than simply a place to share personal updates, company news or a place to share work, the focus is learning and growing together informally and incidentally.

Social learning communities are also distinct from discussion forums or communities of practice. Discussion forums could be seen as an early form of today's communities, since technology didn't allow for free form conversation at scale as it can be designed for today. Threads in discussion forums were a bit more cumbersome to search and had to be organized by topic, creating silos and a non-intuitive end-user experience.

Communities of Practice, on the other hand, tend to be geared towards an expert/student relationship used for questions and answers or sharing best practices. Social learning communities include this relationship, but also leave wide flexibility for food for thought explorations and less focused conversation, where unexpected surprises often occur.

Developing a Social Learning community offers your learners a space to share, interact, learn, and expand.

# Why Develop a Social Learning Community?

Social Learning is already happening in your organization.

Conversations around the water cooler or in the hallway, emails and video chats between coworkers, and in more formal settings, such as a meeting or class, social learning is occurring on its own. In *Social Media Today*, Tiffany Fary shares that Social Learning can take place in an informal or formal setting and sometimes may even occur without the learner realizing that learning is taking place or without making a conscious decision to learn.

It's organic and usually unorganized. Social Learning is more focused on the needs of the individual. In social learning, a participant might ask "What do \*I\* need to know and who knows how to answer this quickly?" Knowledge is primarily consumed or pulled from experts.

By developing a Social Learning Community, your learners have a place to go to have their questions answered by others within your organization. In turn, their post can be viewed by team members, specific departments, or the whole organization. This turns their post into a learning opportunity for a variety of others, who may not have even intended to learn from or even see the post.

This type of incidental, or accidental, unplanned learning occurs by chance when a learner is engaged in another activity, yet stumbles upon an answer to a question they didn't even think to be asking. This unintended consequence of Social Learning Communities is a major part of the process whereby people learn.

## Top Reasons

- Rather than having to rely on pre-determined (and often inconvenient) times and places for social learning, a dedicated Social Learning Community provides a strong avenue for more transformative learning moments that L&D can't predict or plan for, but happens regardless and occurs in the moment of learning need.
- Takes the onus off L&D to always serve as and serve up experts by leveraging the scale of organizational wisdom, rather than missing expertise.
- Users can take ownership over their learning, therefore facilitating more learning as indicated by Adult Learning Principle theory.
- The organization can strategically create a culture of continuous learning, essential for success in the current atmosphere of continuous, rapid change

# Starting Your Social Learning Community

Developing a Social Learning Community is not as easy as setting up a platform and sitting back to watch it develop. It requires intentionality and leveraging learning design expertise, just as any other curricula or program L&D might develop.

To get your community set up for success, here's some crucial steps to follow.

# Identify Learner Personas

Ask yourself who most likely will use this community? Who needs it? Who wants it? Why?

Explore and name the purpose(s) of these users.

This will serve as the starting point for the focus of the community.

As the community organically grows, these initial champions will invite new conversations and users that were not planned for.

Pay attention and grow these new conversations and purposes the community shows it has the energy for.



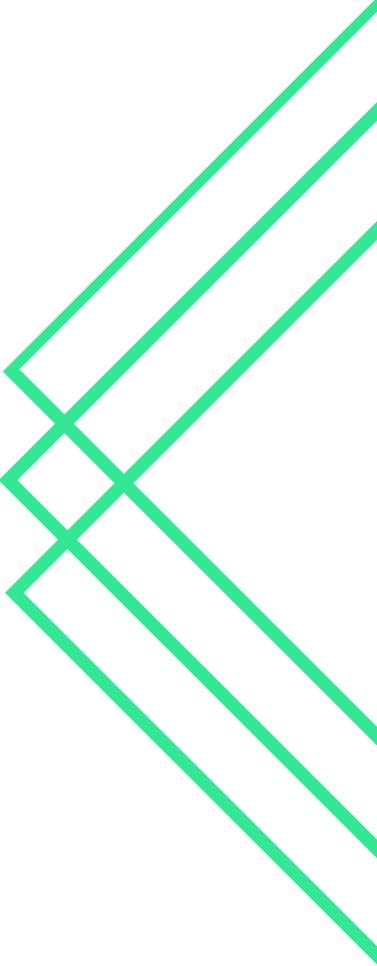
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# Curate Posts in Alignment with Purpose of Community

Build an initial library of posts that align with the purpose of your identified personas.

Some common purposes are:

- Connecting people to people and organizational know-how
- Finding relevant in the moment perspectives
- Exploring situational or new applications and generating new learning
- Supporting people's short-term practical job needs
- A place to connect and support long-term career goals



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# Develop a Communication Strategy

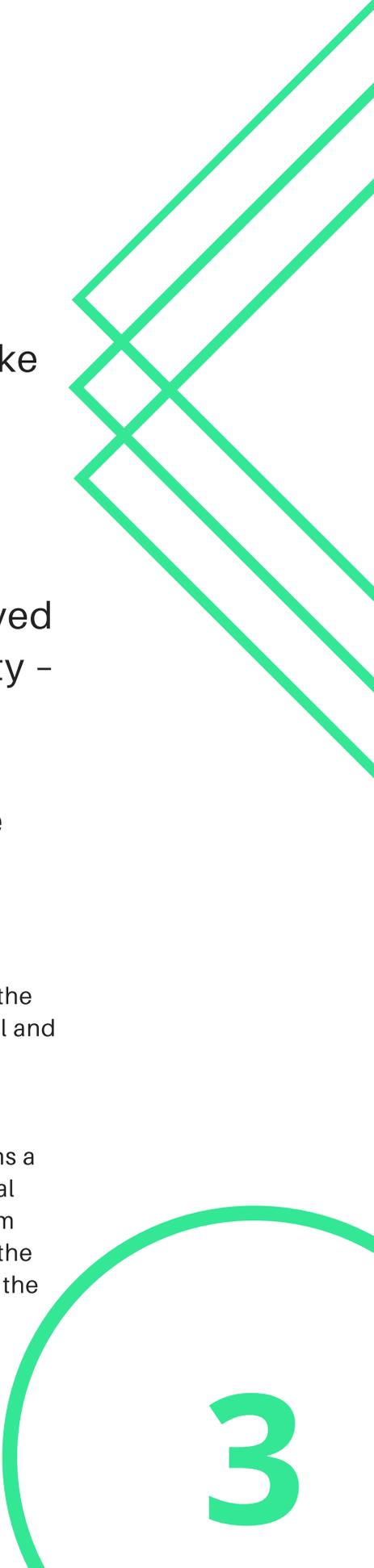
How will you roll out this social community? Like any new initiative, plan how you will communicate that it is here and ready for involvement.

A vital element here is to ask who will be involved in the roll out? Remember that this a community – not a top-down initiative.

Start with a small community and let it become more active before inviting more of the organization.

Consider that Facebook started on one college campus, before becoming the 2.6 billion user community it is today. Showing initial activity helps to enroll and build momentum for more communities to join, until the full organization is involved.

In their white paper on Social Learning, Lane 4 Management Group explains a communication strategy helps people understand what the vision for ‘social learning’ is, how it will help the organization grow, and how it will help them perform, fine tune and innovate in their work. Learners need to care about the aim of creating a ‘living pool of accumulated knowledge’ and, importantly, the role they play in terms of connecting with others, learning, sense-making, reviewing, recreating, and sharing back.



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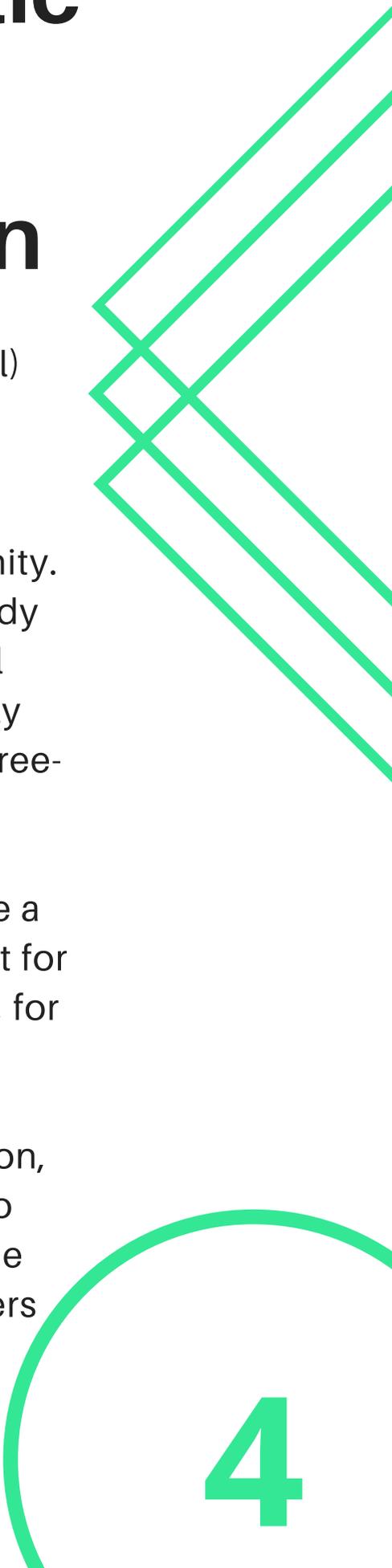
# Encourage Authentic Champion and Leader Participation

Are leaders ready to be vulnerable (read: casual) online? If not, take a pause.

Champions can be anyone, any level in the organization, who is excited about the community. Leaders, though vital in communities, if not ready to engage in a way that supports psychological safety, can create “update” or “celebration” only conversations, rather than the more open and free-flowing conversations.

If it’s not your culture yet, take time to formulate a different approach. Maybe create a channel just for leaders, until they show a greater comfort level, for example.

Demanding participation from anyone; champion, leader or learner, will cause the reverse effect to happen where participation is scoffed at and the community is seen as “just another thing learners have to do.”



4

# Maintain and Encourage Engagement

This is not a “set-it-and-forget-it” learning asset that sits on a shelf.

It requires monitoring, administration, and maintenance.

Encourage engagement through emojis, participation badges, and highlighting posts to share with the department or whole organization.

# Choose the Appropriate Technology

There are platforms that exist such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, or Yammer. Or, if your organization has the resources you can develop a platform specific to your needs. For greater adoption, use a platform that integrates with existing technology so learners have one less technology barrier, if possible.

# Conclusion

Social learning theorists Bandura and Walters note learning is not purely behavioral, but instead a cognitive process that takes place in a social context.

It is why learners prefer to learn in groups, in person or digitally through communities, in which an interchange of knowledge and perspective creates new knowledge personal to individual learners.

Developing a Social Learning Community caters to today's modern learners by allowing them to exchange knowledge and perspective and create new knowledge personal to their needs at a particular time, all while improving their on-the-job behavior and increasing organizational effectiveness.

# References

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# LEARNING CLUSTER DESIGN Group

The Learning Cluster Design Group is a strategic consulting and training organization serving the Learning & Development industry by bringing to life a new model to design modern learning. Rather than designing one-and-done curricula, the LCD model is the first model to champion and show how to design multiple 'learning assets' coordinated across the flow of work for diverse learner constituencies.

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