

Creating Value in an Online Collaborative Space

Individuals join an online space because they feel an affinity for the issue or topic and want to connect with others who are similarly engaged. The potential value of an online collaborative space, sometimes known as an online community of practice, is the promise that users envision when they join. The realized value lies in how well the space addresses their unmet needs.

Online collaborative spaces require the support of an individual or a group of individuals who build and grow learning opportunities. These individuals, called conveners, sense interest in a topic and initiate interactions. They share leadership and empower others to share and lead.

*The IDEA Partnership has summarized its experience in convening communities of practice in an [online guide](#).

With the technology of today, there are many venues for connecting. Why does an individual choose to join and maintain membership in an online collaborative space? Several reasons are integral to understanding the value that a collaborative space provides.

Tips for Conveners of Online Collaborative Spaces

1. Get to know your members.
2. Learn about their roles and the perspectives they bring to the issue.
3. Create ground rules or norms for engagement that clarify how to express diverse perspectives in a way that encourages collaboration.
4. View the collaborative space through the eyes of your members. How are they getting their needs met by participating in the interaction that the site offers?
5. Reach out to new members. Encourage them to become contributing members by suggesting a few simple ways to begin engaging.
6. Set expectations but provide opportunities for contributors to lead an activity.
7. Aim for engagement, but know that some members will engage primarily as viewers of the interaction on your site.

The space attracts an array of individuals with knowledge and/or experience who wish to communicate actively on an issue or topic.

- Online collaborative spaces draw individuals with differences in the way they connect with the issue. This variety is a strength in collaborative spaces. Even among individuals who share the same role, variation exists in the way that they structure and address problems of practice. A common commitment to the issue together with the variation in position among members, location, kinds of knowledge, and degrees of experience offers unlimited opportunities to pose interesting questions and garner responses that can lead to even deeper and more valuable interactions.

- Collaborative spaces present a place to review and store information that reflects the range of perspectives that members bring to a given topic. For example, these spaces offer the opportunity to post the key research and policy documents that impact all the members. In addition, members have the space to present and examine practice documents, share practice approaches, and introduce useful tools that they have developed.

The collaborative space is hosted by an individual or group with credibility on the issue.

- Sometimes individuals are drawn to a site because it is hosted by a group with authority on the topic. The conveners are in roles that represent known sources of knowledge or authority related to the issue. Other times, individuals gravitate to sites where stakeholders that have influence on the issues congregate. Some of the best collaborative sites combine these two elements and provide a space where decision makers reach out to practitioners, where researchers engage the implementers, and where interaction across groups is valued.

Tips for Members of Online Collaborative Spaces

1. Take an active role in making the space work for you.
2. If you have information to share, respond to a post and let others know you want to interact.
3. If you are hesitant to share, offer a comment or thank a contributor for a post. Let others know that their work is helping someone.
4. Ask questions to get others interacting.
5. If you are an experienced online contributor: respond to questions, start new interactions around a timely issue, and offer to lead or co-lead a collaborative activity.

*Through the IDEA Partnership, stakeholders have developed a [blueprint for authentic engagement](#).

The site builds regular, active, and sustained connection with others who are doing shared work.

- One of the most appealing features of an effective online collaboration space is the way in which it creates opportunities for stakeholders to interact about the issue. On effective spaces, members can be leaders and learners.
- For researchers and individuals who work in leadership roles, online collaboration offers a way to ask questions, probe field-based knowledge, and pose potential approaches in a relatively low-risk environment.
- An online space allows individuals at the practice level to communicate what the implementers and intended beneficiaries know and need to know.
- Effective online collaborative spaces become a community of practice when there are predictable opportunities for members to learn from and with each other about relevant issues.

- In online communities of practice, members can co-create new knowledge based on the interaction of members. Co-creation is one of the most important and powerful features of online collaboration. Ideas emerge, get shaped by interaction, are reviewed by members with diverse experiences, and are validated through shared support.
- The site capitalizes on the professional and personal networks of the collaborative members for outreach and dissemination.

Online collaborative spaces can become a bridge across research, policy, and practice. The potential value in an online collaborative space lies in the pull of an issue. But the draw is not enough. Successful online collaboration spaces build online communities where members turn to each other to ask, tell, question, and share. When online collaborative spaces focus on engagement, they quickly learn their value and are far more likely to realize their potential.