Building Online Communities:
Quick Guide for Schools and Kura

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This document accompanies a more thorough review of online communities, focusing more on the applications and key recommendations for schools and kura to establish and improve online learning communities. The accompanying document outlines some online literature and related research surrounding online learning communities and how this became an exciting area of research to support modern teaching and learning.

Purpose

Digital technologies are increasing in prevalence in schools and kura. They can support teaching and learning, social activities, and may deepen learning experiences for ākonga as they experience the social benefits of face-to-face learning outside of the physical boundaries of school. A lot of this may be attributed to COVID-19 and related lockdowns that moved teaching and learning exclusively to online platforms, with many schools, kaiako, and whānau being unprepared for this.

Online learning communities may also be a means of supporting the Digital Technologies | Hangarau Matihiko Curriculum. Ākonga will have opportunities to engage and create online, use technologies and media to find solutions, develop skills online, and engage in civic activities. Kaiako may purposefully design these communities to complement face-to-face instruction and provide engaging activities that support learning using technology.

Applications

1. School Class Groups

Kaiako may use online learning communities to connect ākonga to peers in class. They may display work, communicate homework and deadlines, post notes and resources to accompany classwork, introduce and mediate discussions, encourage meetings and group work, and allow social aspects of the class to extend beyond the physical parameters of the classroom.

Shared learning among ākonga and kaiako includes:

- Recapping things learned
- Asking and answering questions
- Collaboratively working on solutions to problems
- Discussing ideas in further detail
- Sharing and constructively critiquing ideas
- Engaging in conversation with other ākonga and with kaiako
- Providing and receiving feedback
- Sharing resources
- Cataloguing homework, deadlines, and key dates
- Organising class projects, activities, and events

Kaiako may purposefully align online learning communities to the Digital Technologies | Hangarau Matihiko Curriculum. Kaiako should consider:

- What problems will the online learning community address?

- What technologies will ākonga use? (The hosting platform, social media, websites, smartphones, cameras etc.)
- How will ākonga use the online community to plan and implement solutions, and what steps might be involved?
- Where will data be stored, how will it be shared, and how will ākonga analyse and organise data?
- How will ākonga share and summarise their solutions and steps?
- Can these problems in the online learning community be used as evidence for Digital Technologies progress outcomes? https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum/Technology/Progress-outcomes#collapsible1
- How can technology and media be creatively used for solutions?
- How can the online community creatively and collaboratively use technology to make ākonga online creators?

2. Extracurricular Groups

Extracurricular groups at school may benefit from online learning communities to connect ākonga with one another and with coordinators and leaders. This could include sports, cultural, social, arts, religious, environment, leadership groups etc. For example, a community may be formed online to help those interested in a specific learning game, DIY/crafts, LGBTQIA+ ākonga who don't (yet) have a dedicated club or group, gaming groups, those who are friends and may benefit from something fun and creative outside of class time.

Online learning communities may support the following things for extracurricular groups:

- Recap lessons/meetings and provide minutes
- Ask and answer questions
- Organise meetings, fundraisers, and other events
- Communicate responsibilities and deadlines
- Share and constructively critique ideas
- Share resources and media
- Have social and collegial conversations and discussions
- Build and foster friendships

3. Connecting Like-Minded Ākonga

While not specific to a group in school or kura, online learning communities may apply to connecting ākonga based on shared interests. For example, ākonga interested in crafts and DIY, LGBTQIA+, gaming groups, and groups of friends. These may be facilitated by kaiako, allowing them to have fun without relying on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok.

This can be difficult to administrate as it will usually be outside of the jurisdiction of kaiako. In such cases, kaiako cannot monitor language, behaviour, bullying etc.

Tips for Establishing and Maintaining Online Communities

Establishment

1. Assess the needs and purpose of the online community

Schools and kaiako should assess what the needs are for the online learning community, i.e. learning, Digital Technologies skills, socialising, organising events, giving homework, starting discussions etc.

Once the need and purpose have been established, school staff and kaiako should determine what the values of the online learning community are, outlining the norms of behaviour for the community.

Key questions for kaiako:

- What is the key purpose of this community?
- What outcomes do I hope to achieve for ākonga?
- What opportunities are available through this online community?
- What value(s) will guide this community?

2. Determine the platform

Schools should carefully assess what platform the online community will be hosted on, i.e. the school intranet, an external provider, or a social media app such as Facebook Groups.

There are several considerations for what platform is best. If the school intranet is a viable option for engaging in discussions etc., then this is likely a good option as it can be used for other class/school activities.

Schools and whānau may wish to avoid social media such as Facebook Groups to reduce overall social media platform usage and discourage its use during school time. There may also be increased exposure to advertising, distracting, or inappropriate materials, and the rules of discourse on social media will be different from those of the school. Social media usage will also only be usable by ākonga over a certain age. A benefit of social media though is that ākonga already on social media will be on social media and using it often, thus are unlikely to miss updates and discussions outside of school.

External platforms may be preferable to avoid social media usage for learning purposes, but will often require ākonga to consciously sign in to then engage with materials and engage with their peers which they may be unlikely to do outside of school or without being prompted. Kaiako would need to incentivise the usage of external platforms to encourage participation.

Kaiako should also assess how easy or difficult it is for them to moderate content, to quickly mute or remove ākonga should the need arise and to receive notifications and monitor online communities so they may keep an eye on discussions and ensure they remain civil online.

Key questions for kaiako:

- How often will ākonga be expected to check the online community?
- Is it appropriate to host on social media or an external provider?
- How will I monitor content and discussion to ensure it remains civil?
- How likely are ākonga to regularly log in and check this online community?
- Do my preferred platforms align with the values of the school/kura?

3. Set rules for engagement

In order to maintain civil online environments, schools and kura should formalise the rules for engagement, listing rules of how ākonga are to behave in the online environment. This will include things such as the use of rude/insulting language, bullying, sharing inappropriate content, and maintaining the rules and values of the school/kura.

Depending on the platform, there may also be rules of platform use regarding language, types of speech, and inappropriate material.

Kaiako may also discuss the expectations of online learning such as how often ākonga should log in and/or check content, how they should contribute, and what kinds of contributions are encouraged. Note that kaiako will need to be models of these rules so should only ask what is realistic given the boundaries of the school day.

Key questions for kaiako:

- How can I ensure ākonga remain civil in this environment?
- What will I do when things become uncivil?
- How often will I check and monitor interactions online?
- What rules should be set surrounding language, speech, and inappropriate material?
- What kinds of interactions between ākonga will be helpful for the purpose of the online community?

Kaiako Responsibilities

4. Creating a culture/atmosphere of openness, respect, and trust

Kaiako will be responsible for creating an atmosphere that enables conversation, learning, discussion etc. They may start by introducing themselves (if they are not already known), the community and its purpose. This is an opportunity to break the ice, introduce the purpose of the online learning community, and open discussions for ākonga to start conversing.

Throughout discussions, kaiako should encourage open dialogue, keep conversations active, and encourage ākonga to participate. They should be present to remind ākonga they are there, will reply, and will respect their views and contributions.

Key questions for kaiako:

- What expectations will ākonga have of me in the online environment?
- How can I align ākonga to the purpose of the online community early?
- What activities might help break the ice and encourage ākonga to participate?

5. Starting and engaging in discussions

Where discussions are a part of the online learning community, kaiako should proactively start discussions that engage the learning material, encourage participation and support multiple viewpoints to be presented and discussed.

Key questions for kaiako:

- What material is appropriate for discussion online?
- How can I instigate these discussions?
- How can I encourage ākonga to contribute to discussions?

6. Maintain civility

Online civility is essential to be maintained, and should already be captured in the values and rules of engagement of the online learning community. Kaiako can ensure that civility is maintained by modelling this behaviour themselves, muting or removing ākonga who fail to maintain civility, and ensuring language remains appropriate and ākonga treat one another with respect.

Key questions for kaiako:

- What language is appropriate and inappropriate?
- What will I do when someone acts inappropriately?

7. Providing feedback

Kaiako should be providing prompt feedback in a way that encourages participation while also deepening learning for ākonga. This will largely be in the form of replying to discussion comments but may include private correspondence. Kaiako may commend a contribution made by ākonga, encourage them to say more, or make a constructive critique about their response. Kaiako should be wary of how they provide constructive feedback when other ākonga are witness to the feedback.

Key questions for kaiako:

- What feedback should ākonga receive?
- How often should I provide feedback on their contributions?
- How will I communicate positive and constructive feedback?

8. Providing helpful information, resources, and media

The online learning community is a good repository for information and media relating to the online community. Kaiako may upload resources and encourage ākonga to open and engage with materials.

Key questions for kaiako:

- What materials should I include in the online community?
- How will it be shared and downloaded by ākonga?
- How can I avoid students posting/accessing inappropriate material and media?

9. Modelling behaviour

Across actions, kaiako should model good social and participatory behaviours. They should initiate discussions, reply to others, answer questions, and act in a polite, constructive way.

Key questions for kaiako:

- How can I model positive behaviours to ākonga?
- How can I be constructive without being too critical or rude to others?

10. Provide opportunities for activities

Without activities available, ākonga may be stagnant in the online learning community, thus it may be beneficial to provide multiple opportunities for ākonga to participate. This can include discussion topics, questions, polls, quizzes etc. that invite ākonga to participate, share their thoughts, and interact with one another.

Activities, including discussion topics, should allow for diverse talents and interests, and different ways of learning to ensure that all ākonga participating have an opportunity to work to their strengths.

Key questions for kaiako:

- What material can be covered with activities, and what kinds of activities?
- What are some of the key strengths and weaknesses of the ākonga in the community?
- How can the activities cater to different strengths and weaknesses?
- How can weaknesses be developed through online activities?

Risks

Many of the risks associated with online learning communities are those also experienced with online learning and engaging with the Digital Technologies curriculum. These are briefly discussed below, as well as some mitigating factors to reduce risk where possible.

Risk	Mitigation
Teaching staff have limited availability for additional tasks	A very common reason for kaiako not engaging in activities such as additional online learning opportunities is the lack of compensation and recognition for working outside of work boundaries. Online communities will not likely be implemented or implemented successfully by staff who are over-extended or perceive themselves to be over-extended with additional work. Introducing online communities should be planned and integrated with the curriculum so that it occurs as part of teacher and team planning. That way the time required to uphold the online community is planned as part of the delivery of a programme and staff can organise their time in advance. However, moderating an online community will likely require additional time, and this may mean less time for other tasks. This is particularly true as kaiako roles increase in scope and complexity. This needs to be considered alongside how learning is increasingly moving online to ensure that kaiako are treated fairly as administrators of online communities and are not expected to work beyond what is expected in their role.
Teaching staff will work outside of their allotted working hours	Moderating an online community may result in teachers monitoring and contributing to the online environment in their evenings after they have finished school and related activities. As part of the rules of engagement, teachers should determine when and how they will engage with the online community, outlining rules such as no replies from the teacher after 4.00pm so that teachers can have control over their contribution. Responsibilities should be made clear prior to establishing an online community and adjusted as necessary. Kaiako should be clear with should leaders regarding their abilities to be an administrator of online communities and not extend themselves beyond what is appropriate or required of them.

Teaching staff do not have the competence to successfully manage an online community	Online communities are more likely to be managed by staff who are already tech-savvy, and to make staff run online communities without competency will create unnecessary stress for them and is less likely to be successful. Where possible, schools should provide staff with targeted Digital Technologies PLD so they have the sense of self-efficacy to engage with online communities successfully. Those who do not feel competent to run online communities should not be made to do so until they feel they are comfortable and skilled.
Online communities results in increased reliance on devices during school	As a curriculum tool, online communities require the use of digital devices for engagement but should be planned deliberately alongside traditional face-to-face instruction or similar. Kaiako will be responsible for managing how much online communities are used as a tool for engagement, ensuring that their ākonga do not spend too much time online during school time.
Online communities results in increased use of social media (thus increased exposure to harmful material)	Online platforms will not necessarily require social media or may be supported by social media (e.g. sharing YouTube videos) as schools may use other platforms. The introduction of Te Rito may also be used to host school groups without needing social media platforms such as Facebook. Kaiako should monitor the material to ensure nothing harmful is being shared or distributed, and if social media is being purposefully used, kaiako should make efforts to limit its usage.
Online communities lose engagement	Without regular use, the online community will stop being an engaging learning and social tool. It can also be expected that naturally kaiako and ākonga will gradually lose interest in a single online community with time and exposure. Kaiako should ensure they regularly update the platform, host interesting topics and discussions, upload materials and media, and actively encourage ākonga to use them. Without purposefully planning and using the online community for ākonga engagement, the community becomes transactional and ākonga stop engaging.

Online learning communities are not monitored or administrated by school/kura staff	In some cases, online learning communities may be made by ākonga, for ākonga without influence from kaiako. This can make it difficult to monitor the language, behaviour, activities etc. that occur. In worse case scenarios, bullying may occur unseen by kaiako who are unaware that an online learning community has become a toxic environment for some ākonga. Online bullying can be a difficult thing for schools and kura to solve, particularly as they aren't in control of what ākonga do online outside of school or won't be privy to private conversations and interactions that lead to bullying. While school culture can address bullying behaviours, it is important that wellbeing and anti-bullying messages are woven into the curriculum and that the school takes measurable action to reduce bullying in all facets.