

## **Assessment 2: Educational Online Community Analysis**

Colin White, Manny Algarin, and Jonathan Guerra

Department of Educational Technology, New Jersey City University

EDTC 816: Advanced Building Online Communities

Dr. Laura Zieger

March 5, 2023

## Introduction

In the organization's mission statement and reflected upon in the interviewee's responses, the goal of the *New Jersey Literacy Association* (NJLA) is to empower educators, inspire students, and encourage leaders with what is needed to help foster an effective and thriving classroom. Although the organization is based around literacy instruction, the tools provided and meetings held can be carried across all content areas. Teaching practices, regardless of content, apply to any classroom. This can be from the youngest grades in a school all the way to higher education. In Layman's terms, effective teaching in one classroom is effective teaching in another.

NJLA has 12 members on its Board of Directors and does of course welcome other members to their community. Upon registering to join the community, there is a \$30 annual fee for educators; however registration is free for any students who would like to join. This fee is minimal considering the amount of information shared within the community.

As for what is provided by the NJLA, the benefits are three-fold. There are private professional development (PD) sessions for the members of the organization, public PD which are free for anyone to attend, and a running blog where contributors can post helpful tools or strategies that have been used in their classroom. The blog is an especially open element of the community as there can be posts by NJLA members as well as guest contributors. This open forum is essential as these discussions “are divided into categories so that users can search by specific topic” (Blasbalg, 2021). Having the categorized posts certainly helps members as they can look specifically at what they need to research. Regardless of one's affiliation with NJLA, the ultimate goal of the blog and any PD conducted is to share ideas to better the instructional practices for any and all teachers and administrators in attendance.

As it relates to community members' motivation, the objective is fairly clear: fluid discussion of effective practices and information. When one is a member of this community, it is expected that within the PD sessions and/or blog posts, educators will share their ideas and successful applications to their fellow members. This goal is certainly met with NJLA as they meet frequently, albeit virtually, to best enhance each others' instruction.

### **What Is The Organization Seeking To Accomplish Through Their Online Community?**

According to Nicole Mancini, President of NJLA, the online community seeks to make literacy accessible for all by empowering educators, inspiring students, and encouraging leaders with resources. A key feature to online communities is centering the needs and perspectives of its members (Wenger et. al, 2012) similarly to how NJLA focuses on the needs of educators, students, and leaders. The organization aims to reach more educators through their website, social media, and Zoom. A set of technologies are used to serve the organization's mission. The use of multiple tools and platforms is what Wenger et. al. (2012) calls the configuration perspective for using technology in online communities. As a result, NJLA can provide various kinds of support and professional development to educators. Providing professional learning is one way to empower educators (King, 2019).

Motivating participation among educators has become one of NJLA's biggest challenge areas because of how the pandemic impacted the teaching profession. Mancini noticed a decrease in motivation from within the online community and an increase in educator burnout. She states that, ““since February 2020, 300,000 educators have left the profession in the United States’. The decline in the teacher workforce nationally is consistent with the drop of certified teachers in New Jersey since 2019 (Koruth, 2022). In response, NJLA has supported teachers with professional development focused on instruction and mental health. While professional learning

meets the need for educator wellness, the main reason for changes to the educational workforce is the teacher pay gap (Koruth, 2022).

### **What Actions Have They Taken Towards Accomplishing These Goals?**

NJLA achieves its goals by engaging members and nonmembers. Mancini identifies specific strategies through the use of social media, constant contact, its website, professional development, and blog. To achieve its goals, NJLA uses digital tools that engage its members with meetings, open-ended conversations, projects, content, access to expertise, relationships, and individual participation (Wenger et. al, 2012).

Twitter and Instagram are the main social media platforms NJLA uses. They have 328 and 428 followers on Twitter and Instagram, respectively. Similar content is posted on both accounts such as monthly themes, holidays, articles from the blog, motivational messages, and upcoming events and webinars. On the Twitter account, the mission is stated differently than how it was published on the website and stated in the interview. On Twitter, the mission is “to promote the literacy development of readers and writers across the state of New Jersey”. Mancini summarizes this statement as making “literacy accessible for all” and further elaborates on this mission by including supporting educators, students, and leaders with resources. Differences in mission statements can cause confusion about the community’s identity and misunderstandings for new members who initially might take “time to familiarize themselves with the functioning and point of view of the community before jumping in” (Wenger et. al, 2012).

NJLA’s blog page highlights recent posts on the sidebar above an archive that is organized by months. Topics vary and range from vocabulary instruction, incorporating joy, and the power of positive affirmations. These topics reflect the goal Mancini stated for supporting teachers by providing “professional development related both to the craft as well as mental health”. If interested in contributing to the blog, there is a “Guest Blogger Form” individuals can complete. The

opportunity to contribute as a guest blogger is an effective way to encourage participation (Ren et al., 2011). For each article, readers have the option to “like” the post by clicking on a heart. Likes from readers is a form of feedback that can generate motivation for more participation (Ren et al., 2011). Also, readers can share the article on other social media platforms directly from the blog by clicking the Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn icons. These sharing tools potentially show the contributions of others which helps with motivating others to engage (Ren et al., 2011).

The website provides access to public and members-only events. Additionally, there is a shop to purchase NJLA branded merchandise, scholarship opportunities, and information on writing contests and reading initiatives. Members enjoy access to more literacy resources and professional learning events. In the last two years, NJLA has hosted various professional development sessions. For example, there was a summer series that happened in August on a weekly basis. In collaboration with the West Jersey Reading Council, the organization has been able to host notable guests while keeping costs low.

### **What Metrics Do They Employ To Understand Their Progress Towards These Goals?**

NJLA uses Wix to track their traffic and participation for any and all events that are held. On top of that, they are tracking how many members are signing up for the organization. That way, there is a reliable source of data to let them know just exactly how many people are participating in and engaged within the meetings that are held. If the numbers are particularly low, then there will be an uptick in the PD provided and an increase in social media presence.

Social media has become an intricate element of how NJLA grows. They track the amount of followers that they have and are also putting out notices for upcoming events. This, of course, is a very effective way to improve upon external member participation. Online communities, such as NJLA, “cultivate a group of committed users who will engage with their

products and content” (Pousson, 2021). That should be seen as a positive, of course, as NJLA are bringing people together that have a shared interest in literacy instruction.

Given the prominent social media presence, there is a very high rate of the speed and quality of question answering. Given that all members are educators, albeit some in the administration role, members can easily relate to one another. With that, there is a connection felt between members of the community that fosters a mutual respect. As a result, members are readily available to help out colleagues with any questions and issues one might have. This is a clear positive attribute as it creates a very positive, welcoming online community that NJLA has established.

## **Conclusion**

The New Jersey Literacy Association is a successful organization because its strategies and operating principles are congruent with best practices. Any online communities involved in education need to be able to fluidly react to the changing landscape of students’ needs. The NJLA is structured in a way that allows for the expansion of its domain and the opportunities for members to share in the latest strategies for literacy and beyond (Wenger et al., 2009). Additionally, the NJLA’s emphasis on monitoring and expanding its social media presence allows them to target four key trends: increased connectivity across time and space, new modes of engagement, changing geographies of community and identity, and the usage of a socially active medium (Wenger et al., 2009). Increased connectivity is fostered through the use of Instagram and Twitter. Social media can be a valuable tool for creating “transparency in a socially active medium” (p. 187). The NJLA utilizes social media to determine what values and trends are important to its community members. There is also an increasing level of connectivity as individuals transition from those who are interested in the NJLA and attend free professional

development to full-fledged members who have access to private training and events. The NJLA's easy-to-use "Guest Blogger Entry Form" allows for new modes of engagement by encouraging members to contribute their own personal perspectives. Finally, although the NJLA is by design a New Jersey-based organization the board members have nevertheless demonstrated a cognisance of changing geographies of community and the socially active elements of their medium. This is accomplished by the emphasis being placed on the user experience, as a central authority could not adequately respond to the previously mentioned trends.

The curated division between the blog component and the presentations/events helps to regulate the social density, so that members seeking insight into literacy are not expected to engage too much within any area (Millington, 2012). Because so much of the NJLA's focus is the sharing of information and strategies between members, there is an organic manner in which individuals with good ideas can gain personal influence in the community (Millington, 2012). Furthermore, the NJLA does an excellent job of encompassing the two components that Millington (2012) describes as being part of "likability:" positivity and friendliness (p. 141). The blog posts emphasize the mental health of educators, demonstrating a "friendly" concern for fellow practitioners, and a pervasive tone of positivity throughout the language used in posts that discuss strategy. This likability component encourages members to connect in ways that embody Illich's (2009) conception of "conviviality" as "autonomous and creative intercourse" that leads to "freedom realized in personal interdependence" (p. 11).

The NJLA benefits from the cohesion of the teaching community as a whole and it can subsequently be argued that this contributes to an identity-based commitment (Ren et al., 2011). Likewise, the parameters of the community being New Jersey, also fosters bonds-based

commitment (Ren et al., 2011). The greatest area in which the NJLA encourages commitment is in needs-based commitment. Ren et al. (2011) define this as a commitment and participation based on “the net benefits that people experience from the community” (p. 105). The culmination then of the NJLA’s overall effectiveness exists in the way it caters to the needs of its members (teachers), targets an area of tremendous interest to its members (literacy), and manages the manner in which information is shared and connections between members are fostered.

### **Collaboration**

The table below describes the role and responsibilities for each team member. An initial meeting was organized by Colin to review the assignment and discuss responsibilities. Progress on individual parts was communicated through whatsapp. A follow up meeting was scheduled in order to recap on interview notes. Before submitting, the team read over the finalized paper.

| Team            | Role and Responsibility                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Colin White     | Project Lead: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Setting up meeting and organizing notes</li> <li>- Interviewing manager</li> <li>- Write introduction</li> <li>- Page 4</li> </ul> |
| Jonathan Guerra | Writer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conclusion</li> <li>- References and Appendices</li> </ul>                                                                                |
| Manny Algarin   | Writer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pages 2, 3, and 7</li> <li>- References and Appendices</li> </ul>                                                                         |

## References

- Blasbalg, C. L. (2021, April 27). *How to build an online community in 9 steps, with examples*. Wix Blog. <https://www.wix.com/blog/2021/04/online-community/>
- Illich, I. (2009). *Tools for conviviality*. Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd.
- King, F. (2019). *Professional learning: empowering teachers?*, Professional Development in Education, 45:2, 169-172, DOI: 10.1080/19415257.2019.1580849
- Koruth, M. A. (2022, November 15). Gov. Murphy issues order to create task force to address teacher shortage. North Jersey Media Group.  
<https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/education/2022/11/15/nj-gov-murphy-task-force-teacher-shortage-new-jersey/69647664007/>
- Mancini, N. (2023, March 1). Interview by C. White.
- Millington, R. (2012). *Buzzing communities: How to build bigger, better, and more active online communities*. FeverBee.
- Pousson, M. P. (2021, March 9). *The future of social media & the rise of online communities*. Medium.  
<https://medium.com/sprinter-hq/the-future-of-social-media-the-rise-of-online-communities-73a2b2e5db21>
- Ren, Y., Kraut, R.E., Kiesler, S., & Resnick, P. (2011). Encouraging commitment in online communities. In R.E. Kraut & P. Resnick (Eds.), *Building successful online communities: Evidence-based social design* (pp 77-124). The MIT Press.
- Wenger, E., White, N., & Smith, J.D. (2009). *Digital habitats: Stewarding technology for communities*. CPsquare.

## **Appendix A**

### **Interview with Nicole Mancini, President of NJLA**

#### **1. What is your organization seeking to accomplish through its online community?**

The New Jersey Literacy Association's mission is to empower educators, inspire students, and encourage leaders with the resources they need to make literacy accessible for all. Using online mediums including our website, social media, and Zoom, we are able to branch out and reach more educators. This allows us to provide professional development opportunities as well as support.

#### **What are some specific strategies the organization is taking?**

- Social Media - Twitter & Instagram
- Constant Contact - Regular emails with event information and news from NJLA
- Website - Has both a public and members-only section with additional resources
- Blog

#### **2. What actions have you taken towards accomplishing these goals?**

In order to reach more New Jersey educators, we have held a variety of professional development sessions online for the past two years. This includes a summer series that takes place on a weekly basis each August. We have brought in guests such as Pernille Ripp, Colleen Cruz, Berit Gordon, and a number of children's authors. Through partnerships with the West Jersey Reading Council, we have been very successful in keeping costs down while bringing in big-name speakers.

#### **How do you motivate participation and contribution among members?**

This has been the most challenging area for us. Since the pandemic, we have seen a big decrease in motivation. Many educators are struggling with burnout and the number of teachers in New Jersey and the country has gone down significantly. Since February 2020, 300,000 educators have left the profession in the United States. Our focus has been to support teachers through professional development related both to the craft as well as mental health.

**3. What metrics do you employ to understand their progress towards these goals? (e.g., issue turnaround time, customer satisfaction, external participant numbers and activity, lurker-to leader conversion, speed/quality of question answering).**

We use Wix for our website, blog, and events. It provides data on traffic, who signs up as a member and for events, etc.

**What data do you use to know if you are on track to reaching your goals? How do you know if you are reaching your goals?**

As a board, we set annual goals for membership and use events to help drive numbers. It has been successful as we have grown quite a bit in terms of paying members over the past two years.