

Online Moderating 3: Power of Teams

Hand more of the work over to your community members!

One of the biggest difficulties for the online moderators I talk with is sheer volume of information. They often feel overwhelmed by the prospect of going through all the feedback, sorting and analysing it. A moderator working on two or three communities at once has twice or thrice the problem.

All is not lost! This is one of the common features of qualitative studies – or any study where you have activities with open-ended questions and discussions - there is simply too much data. The question is, how can you deal with it?

My suggestion is that you start to use some of the techniques and tools we have adopted over the years in face-to-face qual. Have you ever wonder why a focus group is not more than 10 people? Partly it is to replicate intimate structures, like family or friendship groups, but it is also so that the moderator cannot be overwhelmed by everybody speaking at once, while at the same time, is able to reach out to every group member at some time during the process. It is a social protocol of such groups that people take it in turns to speak and listen. In that way the group is formed from the sharing and contributions of its members.

Those of you who have attended a **Big Talk**, the name we give to our large groups, will have noticed that we set up teams throughout the session and allow them to work on tasks and discussions independently. We then ask them to feedback a summary of their deliberations to the whole Big Talk community.

How could this work online?

Well, typically an online community might be 300 members. Even 10% of these speaking simultaneously will feel unmanageable, especially if their feedback is asynchronous and some are posting without reference to others' posts. This has the effect of destroying the narrative or sequence of meaning in the feedback and make it very hard to follow. What can you do?

It would be amazing if you could organise the community to do more of the filtering and organisation itself – as we do in the Big Talk. How could you do that? Here is my suggestion. When you build and register your community members, you automatically place them in teams of not more than ten. You give them a reason, something like:

“When you join us you’ll be part of a team, like a small group, with other community members. There will be an activity or two to help you get to know your team, figure out how to collaborate and elect a team spokesperson and any other roles you want to create.”

Your team will, from time to time be given unique activities or questions that we'll be relying on you to complete on behalf of the whole community.

There will also be rules to prevent any member from pestering or intruding into others' lives in an uninvited fashion, though we want you to be as free to share thoughts and ideas about our topic as possible, so an acceptable degree of collaboration is desirable.

There will be team prizes and incentive throughout the life of the community."

Each team will choose its name and these names will be disseminated around the community.

Then, when you have questions or a discussion you want to launch you can select a team or number of teams to work on it, and ask the team leader to moderate (giving some simple suggestions for how to do it) and feedback to you the considered answer or suggestion of the team, in summarised form. If you as the central moderator have any questions or puzzles you can go back to the team.

Once your teams are established you can have competitions and challenges which will increase engagement and attachment. With 30 teams in a 300 member community, it would be straightforward to run 5 or 6 activities or discussions simultaneously – and get filtered responses.

I would be very surprised if this did not increase engagement substantially too. It strikes me at the moment that a feeling of belonging and significance might be hard to come by for community members - and that therefore their involvement will often seem lacking in meaning. Once they are linked just one bit more closely to other members & their identity, or their team's identity are more defined and assured, I am sure they will contribute more and bring more of themselves to the community!

If you would like a pdf of this post it is here: