

# The 5 Pillars of Social Learning Design

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## ▶ Introduction

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The future of education is online, and the future of online learning is social.

Nonetheless, educators globally are experiencing a degraded transition into online learning. Conventional classroom techniques do not seamlessly translate into the online environment, and the approach to online teaching and lesson planning requires a re-design. A makeshift approach is to digitise educational content delivery into passively consumed online formats, and to rework classroom activities into corrective “e-assessment” tasks. In consequence, the experience falls short of the expected objectives when compared to facilitated face-to-face learning, revealing how important it is for teaching to actively involve learners, and to foster unhindered educational interactions between peers.

As a result, it has never been more important to ensure that online learning is designed in a manner which brings active, constructive, and social learning experiences to the forefront, and takes full advantage of the merits and possibilities of an online environment. With proper social learning design, online learning offers a rich and social interaction landscape which has under-explored opportunities to exceed the expectations of educators, rather than merely delivering an underwhelming imitation of a face-to-face experience. The five concepts introduced can each be identified in great online social learning design, and can be harmoniously woven together to provide learners with the most distinguished and creditable online learning experiences.



**DAVID COLLIEEN**

Founder and  
Chief Technology Officer  
OpenLearning.com



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### CO-CREATION

Learners taking creative and collective ownership over their learning alongside their peers, teachers and mentors; contributing to, and re-configuring their learning environment and experiences together as a group.



### SELF-EXPRESSION

Encouraging learners to construct their own knowledge, understanding, ideas, meaning, values, attitudes and identity, shaped by their own experiences and passions.



### CROWDSOURCING

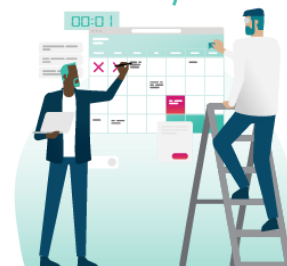
Actively sourcing ideas, decisions, feedback, individual contributions, or the resulting artefacts of small tasks from across the community of learners, or an even larger pool of participants.

# 5 Pillars of Social Learning Design



### SOCIAL PREENCING

Helping learners experience the supportive presence of others within a community of learning by encouraging incidental social interactions and networking.



### MANAGING COLLABORATION

Optimising group or team formation, organisation, and workflows relating to managing communication, contribution, delegation, and ease of social interaction.

## Co-creation

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Learners taking creative and collective ownership over their learning alongside their peers, teachers and mentors; contributing to, and re-configuring their learning environment and experiences together as a group. This extends to co-authorship of learning materials, co-design of projects, co-curation of community artefacts, co-analysis of results, and co-evaluation of the learning process.



Co-creation occurs when learners inhabit the same space as their peers and mentors and endeavour to create, organise, configure, and design their learning experiences together as a group. This occurs between both groups of peers, as well as between groups of learners and teachers.

If imagining a conventional classroom (or performing an image search for the term “classroom”), the most established image will be of rows (or groups) of desks facing a whiteboard. Teachers may adopt this architecture without much thought as to whether this is the most effective layout for their learners, or for the activity being conducted. Furthermore, the learners do not expect to have any say in this matter either - the classroom is the teacher’s realm of authority, not a space learners are encouraged to reconfigure or customise for their own learning needs. Fostering an environment of co-creation subverts these notions, and means that as teachers we question the conventions which may be inhibiting co-creation, and empower our learners to re-configure their spaces, experiences, communities, and activities for their own learning needs. If we invite our learners to decide how the room should be arranged to

enhance their own learning needs, and to pick up the furniture (physical or figurative) and rearrange it, we are inviting our learners to become co-creators in the design and delivery of their own learning experiences. In doing so we empower learners to take ownership over their learning and their learning community, and become more deeply engaged and passionate, leading to greater educational transformation. As such, ideal co-creation can be thought of as a community who are continually working together to enhance and develop their own learning experiences, not just instructing groups to create deliverables together as part of an activity.



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Creating such a learning experience together can look like:

- **Co-authorship**, where knowledge is produced or recorded together. For example, learner-generated texts, community-created course notes and resources, or a learner-created digital textbook for a course.
- **Co-design**, where everyone is actively involved in the design of some part of the learning process. For example, co-designing a project topic to undertake, or one group co-designing and devising methods of teaching for other groups of learners (as is commonly seen in a “jigsaw activity”).
- **Co-curation** of community contributions, coming together as a community to help provide feedback and decision making around showcasing commendable examples.

- **Co-analysis** of a scenario together as a group, to develop further discourse, form consensus, or to come to a common conclusion (as is commonly seen in team-based learning activities).
- **Co-evaluation** of activities and educational experiences, to provide teaching/learning feedback or educational insights relating to each other's learning processes.

And co-creation specifically between learners and teachers may involve:

- Learners as consultants providing observations, discussion, and feedback on teaching, or co-evaluating learning experiences;
- Learners co-designing future course activities (or curriculums);
- Mentors as active participants in group activities. For example, mentors taking on particular team roles, or learners and mentors writing/producing works collaboratively.





## Crowdsourcing

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Actively sourcing ideas, decisions, feedback, individual contributions, or the resulting artefacts of small tasks from across the community of learners, or an even larger pool of participants.

In the digital world, stimulating content underpins social engagement. To expect a teacher or facilitator to be the sole source of a constant stream of inspiration is both impractical and inadequate; such content needs to not only be frequently refreshed, but needs to cater to multiple personalities and come from a diverse variety of perspectives. In this regard, your learners are themselves an invaluable resource.

Crowdsourcing is the sourcing of ideas, decisions, or the resulting artefacts of small tasks from a large pool of participants. Collecting the results can then be used to form the foundation of an activity, or to stimulate ongoing community engagement.

There are familiar dedicated crowdsourcing sites or apps which source solutions to problems such as graphic design, proofreading, testing, or funding. Likewise, within an online learning environment you would be surveying your community of learners for interesting supplementary resources, reflections, personal experiences, opinions, analogies, feedback, or other contributions. The resulting collection of contributions can then be put to use as a content repository, to calculate an aggregate, generate a



dataset, or otherwise form the basis of another learning activity. For example, you may invite your learners to populate, rate, and leave feedback on a crowdsourced collection of topic-relevant resources (e.g. articles, online videos, or research papers). Another example would be to run an activity based on the so-called “Feynman Technique” for simplifying a complex topic into simple explanations. Firstly, learners would each contribute their best attempt at a simplistic analogy to explain the topic. Once a repository of explanations has been populated, learners can find which contributions are most relatable, or most helpful, and critique, rate, or evaluate each other’s contributions.



Your learners are themselves an invaluable resource.

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Crowdsourcing is often followed by this kind of editing-down process, which aims to compare, curate, evaluate, count, order, or provide a subsequent summary or conclusion. This can be done individually (or in groups) by learners as part of a discovery activity, may be performed automatically by a tool, may involve a designated facilitator, or be outsourced once again to the entire learner base as another crowdsourcing activity.

### Other examples of crowdsourcing include:

- Collecting reflections or opinions on a topic;
- Collecting peer feedback (qualitative commentary, or quantitative ranks/measures) on learners’ contributions;
- Generating a dataset for a subsequent activity;
- Sourcing course or activity feedback to help teachers improve their learning design;
- Sourcing a glossary of terms for a topic area.

## Managing Collaboration

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Optimising group or team formation, organisation, and workflows relating to managing communication, contribution, delegation, and ease of social interaction.



Workplaces today are providing greater flexibility as we shift away from traditional workspaces, traditional business hours, and traditional teams. Remote-working, hotdesking and a shift away from in-person meetings are all becoming an employee expectation with a rise in the use of virtual collaboration tools. With online education following suit, just as workplace processes are changing, learning design also needs to undergo this same virtual transformation.

Collaboration is commonly hindered by complicated technology and unintuitive digital methods of communication. Leaving groups of learners to their own devices within an online conference call, or to collaborate over email will both likely fall short of expectations, if assuming the same productivity as a face-to-face environment. As well as general frustration with a fragmented workflow, or the antiquity of these technologies, learners transitioning into an online mode of collaboration will face uncertainty surrounding digital etiquette, protocol, and social expectations. As a result, learners are easily demoralised by poorly organised, or loosely defined online collaboration efforts.

The solution is to provide well-designed collaboration management strategies. Putting the proper structure, guidance, instruction, and tools in place can create a highly effective online environment for collaboration. This can be imagined in a social setting as the difference between a group meeting with no particular agenda, compared to a group who focus their attention on a well-designed board game. The focus shifts from simply providing a tool or space, to actually designing how learners are going to interact within that tool or space, in the most effective manner. Designing specific rules of engagement, playbooks, and scripts of interaction (for example turn taking behaviours) all assist in streamlining collaboration efforts. This may relate to defining general expectations, establishing particular etiquette, guiding how to provide feedback to other learners, defining version control procedures, delegation of tasks, purposeful use of online space or scheduled time, or other forms of social coordination. In designing for these interactions, a plethora of online consumer tools are at the ready. While mainly designed for workplace collaboration, many can be adapted for use in online learning environments.



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Good collaboration design focuses on how people best work together; specifically how to organise, delegate, and optimise workflows for activities which involve multiple personalities trying to achieve a common goal. Such design also takes into account emotions, personalities and attitudes; successfully managing collaboration results in everyone involved working together effectively as a team, with mutual respect, shared responsibilities, and a cooperative spirit - and with little friction from the tools and technologies put to use. Well designed collaboration will establish effective

communication, and minimise any opportunities for confusion or disempowerment to arise.

### Examples of managing and optimising collaboration include:

- Using a Kanban board to organise delegated tasks
- Providing purposeful “rules of play” for video calls, chat rooms, forums, or comment threads
- Providing instruction on how learners are expected to interact with various tools, or each other’s contributions
- Using calendared events to coordinate interactions, e.g. scheduling video conferences to coordinate specific interactions, or designating specific times to perform specific tasks
- Creating specific areas for stimulating different kinds of asynchronous interaction
- Organising the community into groups of delegated responsibility, e.g. delegating community facilitation, curation, or periodical publishing responsibilities to groups of learners



## Social Presencing

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Helping learners experience the supportive presence of others within a community of learning by encouraging incidental social interactions, learners making themselves more socially present, and proactive social networking, as well as instigating collective action, and building a greater collective capacity for the learning community.

In an online environment it is key to build social awareness within a community of learners, and for learners to become aware of their own social presence and their ability to shape and inform the community. Conventional teaching practices may view learners as pupils who are to be taught, or as participants attending sessions. In a social learning environment, more effective learning occurs when the learners are viewed as *inhabitants* of the virtual community who not only participate in learning activities, but also foster valuable educational relationships with one another and help to build an effective community of practice. Online learning design needs to encourage learners to be “socially present” and provide an experience which is less lonely and more collective.

The overall creative, collaborative or transformational ability of a group (its collective capacity) is dependent on how effectively supportive relationships form between its members. However, while a supportive community of learners helps structured learning activities run more effectively, creating this community needs to happen organically. Relying only on structured lesson-based activities does not afford learners the incidental

and serendipitous interactions required to build trust, vulnerability, and rapport - all of which are needed to meaningfully interrelate as a collective.

Collective capacity is enhanced by designing spaces (physical or virtual) to be inhabited by its members, not just as areas for instruction or participation. Relying only on tightly-controlled or scripted interactions between members of a group, members will not be afforded the required opportunities to discover another's social presence, nor be encouraged to deeply develop their own. The more casual conversation, rapport-building and incidental social interaction that occurs between learners, the more the group will tend towards proactive ownership and self-facilitation of their own community. This in turn creates organic opportunities for reciprocal teaching (learning by teaching others), wider community inclusion (and lower attrition), further opportunities to develop interpersonal skills (or "soft skills"), and the ability to instil learning outcomes as strong values upheld across all interactions within the community as a whole (rather than the more difficult task of ensuring outcomes are met in every individual, at scale).



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As learners develop an awareness of how they (and their peers) inhabit their learning environment, social presencing will also help to surface *latent* or underlying issues and further learning opportunities that otherwise would never be talked about or identified in a more regimented or socially isolated environment.

Designing for increased social presence may involve:

- Front-loading courses (or new groups of learners) with social introductions, icebreaker games, and community-building activities.

- Orchestrating frequent opportunities for members of a group to continually build rapport, socialise, and have meaningful conversations.
- Creating activities and periodicals which focus on casual conversation, learners' feelings, and attitudes towards topic areas, and helping each other with their own learning processes. For example, curating a course "Advice Column", releasing bulletins relating to social goings-on in the community, or designing spaces dedicated to learners getting to know one another.
- Showing the presence of others inhabiting the same space. For example, seeing who is around online, interaction notifications, activity feeds, personal status updates, broadcasting other's achievements, who is watching/listening to what, etc.
- Creating spaces for common interest groups to meet and hold casual conversations, and spaces for learners to explore tangential ideas together (off-topic areas of interest sparked from core discussions).
- Fostering gratitude; designing areas to nominate peers for community recognition.
- Encouraging learner commentary on each others' ideas and learning processes.
- Course journalism, such as collecting and showcasing exemplary or interesting community contributions as they occur, or encouraging learners to become course journalists - finding and sharing community-formed ideas with social commentary (memes, in-jokes, stories, strange/funny occurrences).



## Self-Expression

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Encouraging learners to construct their own knowledge, understanding, ideas, meaning, values, attitudes and identity shaped by their own experiences and passions - as well as developing the skills required to learn from one another's reflections, analogies, and shared experiences through meaningful conversation.



Activity design dominated by tasks where learners must find the correct answers to each question is a worrying trend in online learning. While it is important for learners to be able to come to correct conclusions and demonstrate accuracy, a focus on seeking an authoritative judgement can hinder a learner's ability to develop their own deeper understanding. Furthermore, when learners are all tasked with finding the same answer to a question, the opportunities for social discourse are severely limited.

To create a more social experience, design efforts should instead focus on self-expression. This encourages learners to construct their own understanding, ideas, and meaning, from their own reflections, shaped by their own experiences. This is in contrast to the aforementioned correction, which encourages behaviours akin to *supplication*, where seeking correct answers or authoritative judgements become the learner's predominant motivations.

Designing for self-expression capitalises on all the different experiences each learner brings with them into the learning community, and leverages these differences as

opportunities for others to better learn from one another and engage in meaningful conversation. In contrast, supplicative experiences not only fail to provide stimulus for social interaction (as each learner is expected to act in exactly the same manner), but can even be threatened by community engagement, where the sharing of ideas (spoilers, cheating, or correct answers) undermines the value of the exercise.

A focus on self-expression also furthers the potential for learners to practice building both their personal identity as it relates to their learning, and their social identity within the learning community. Encouraging the sharing of - and reflection on - each other's way of engaging with their learning provides further opportunities to practice critical thinking skills, and develop interpersonal "soft" skills such as empathy, communication, and respectfulness.



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To effectively support self-expression, the community must be respectful and encouraging of learners making themselves more vulnerable. Even though expressions of self should not exempt from constructive criticism, feedback and correction, the interaction design must put in a considered effort to reduce any fear of failure, and demonstrate that all contributions are expected to receive accepting and educationally supportive reactions.

## Examples of designing for self-expression include:

- Activities which provide stimulus and then ask the learner to share their own related experiences, insights, perspectives, or personal reflections
- Open-ended scenarios where drawing from past experience is useful
- Providing opportunities to be creative with presentation formats or cross-disciplinary skill-sets, e.g. encouraging artistic merit in technical disciplines
- Motivating learners with novelty and personal discovery (e.g. invention, or being the first to achieve something)
- Tasking different learners with different roles or objectives to stimulate a breadth of discussion
- Encouraging learners to come up with their own real-world applications of course concepts

## ► Resources for Learning Designers

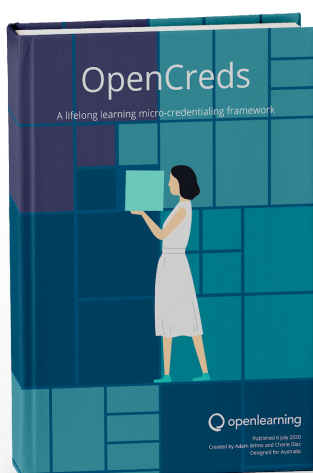
While higher education institutions and organisations around the world have faced significant disruption due to COVID-19, some areas of education have seen an increase in demand. This includes online skills training, short courses, and micro-credentials, among others. OpenLearning is ready to support learning designers and course creators in navigating this rapidly changing landscape with the resources below.

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