

Enabling Effective Learning Communities in **5 Steps**



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Engaged Learning Communities

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5 Ways to Build an Engaged Learning Community

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Case Study:

How Dr Wendy Garnham built an engaged learning community with Talis Elevate

// We've put together this ebook to share some of the insights we've learned from working with hundreds of academics over the past few years as they've shaped their own engaged learning communities. Please enjoy this guide, we hope you find it useful, and please let us know your thoughts! //



Matt East - Education Lead, Talis

Engaged Learning Communities

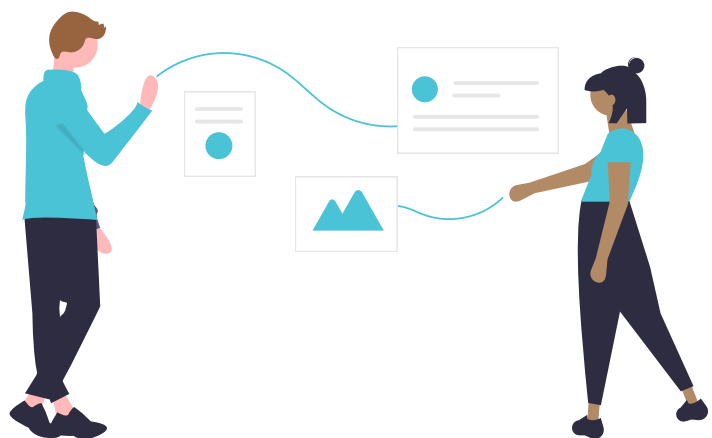
What is an engaged learning community and why is it important?

An engaged learning community is a collection of individuals, focused around a shared learning goal or project, each playing a role in the learning process together to co-create, shape, and synthesise knowledge together.

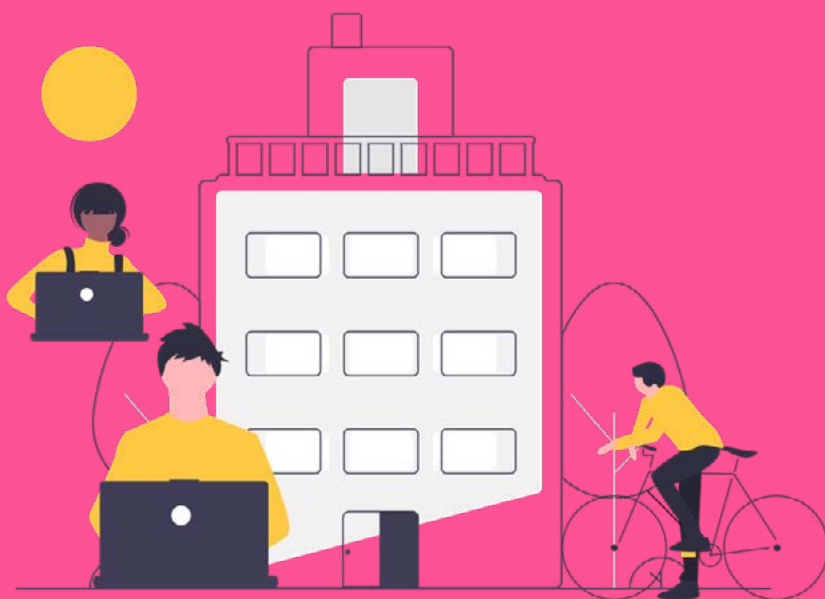
Regardless of the student's level of knowledge on the subject matter, their varied perspectives, experiences, and thoughts around shared learning goals can play a transformational role in the workings of a learning community.

Students deserve the opportunity for honest discussion, effective communication, and alignment of activity to assessment, in order to give them the best chance at success.

In this guide, we delve into 5 key areas that will help you build a thriving, animated, and engaged learning community.



1. Understand Your Learning Community



No learning community is the same. Every cohort you teach will have varying preferences, experiences and perspectives to bring to the environment. Developing an understanding of the challenges and limitations of the community enables you to adjust your approach to better serve your students.

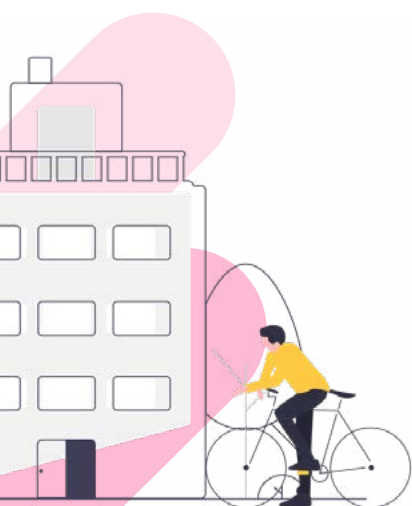
Some students will thrive in an online environment, and some may be lost without a face-to-face element. If all of your learning activities follow the same pattern, you might be preventing your students from achieving their full potential.

Taking time to understand the environmental and personal challenges ultimately helps students engage more deeply, and allows you to support them more effectively. Think about the learning experience from your students eyes at point of design, and gather input from the community at point of delivery.

Making the Subject Matter More Accessible

When developing knowledge on a subject or topic, students can be faced with resources that are difficult to digest. One of our student users from the University of Lincoln described this as 'reading to the maximum point of knowledge and not knowing where else to go'. For independent learning tasks designed around acquiring and shaping knowledge, this can be a real blocker for many.

Presenting the subject matter in alternative means, for example, through visual aid, or from a different perspective can be a powerful mechanism for lowering the barriers to entry on the topic. Why not undertake a crowdsourcing activity around specific subject matter, asking your students to critically evaluate alternative resources as part of the process to share with the community?



Providing Students With Choice

In a diverse learning community, the acquisition of knowledge can come in many forms. Some of the resources you select may feel inaccessible to some students. Be flexible with the content you share, and allow students to navigate tasks in their own way. It may also provide you with valuable insight into your cohort's preference on content types.

Engagement Takes Many Shapes

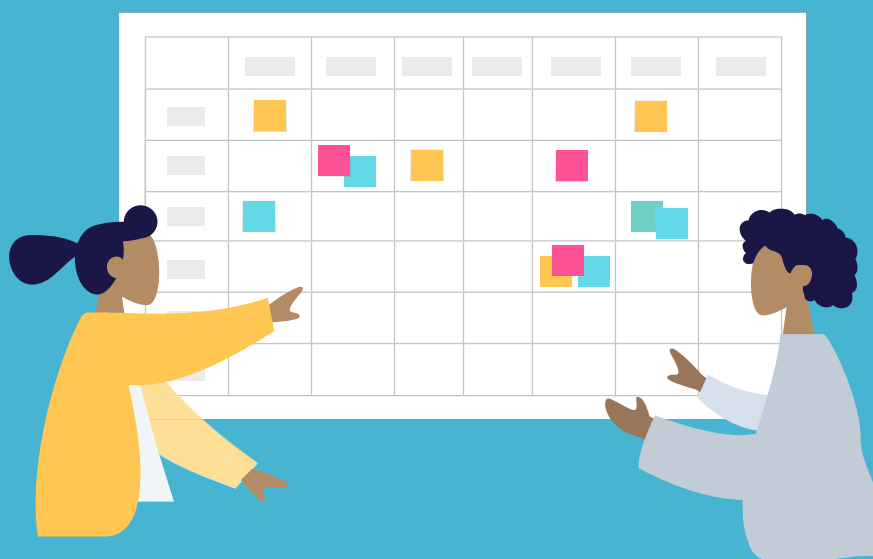
Understanding your student's methods of interaction and preference for engagement early on can be valuable to help you plan activities. Check-in regularly with your community, and ask them for honest feedback on how they are getting on. Learning about their challenges or concerns helps you identify when they need more guidance, support, or learning opportunities. And remember, engagement doesn't necessarily mean public or collaborative, a student could be hugely engaged but not feel comfortable doing so publicly.

Jesse Stommel describes how he provided his students with choices around the tools, resources, and conversations to be part of in his Film Studies class.

"I love giving students choice because I want them to self-select into their learning communities. I don't want to dictate tools to students, I want students to make their own decisions about how they engage on the web. Instead, I start by thinking about what I want students to do. I want them to engage with the film, and I want them to do it in a way that makes more sense to them. Whether it's annotating moments within Talis Elevate, or writing a blog post response on Medium. Students say that's what they love."

2.

Define Your Expectations Together and Early



It's all about making your expectations clear from the start. Students should have a good understanding of what's required from them throughout the module at the outset of the course.

That covers not only the amount of work required, but the way in which they should engage independently or with peers, how you will respond and utilise their contributions and how this will make them successful.

The Role of the Academic in the Community

Sometimes, an effective learning community is a space where the academic could be seen to have little active involvement. Take a step back and allow learning to evolve amongst the cohort.

This works when your involvement in the space is clearly defined, so students know how to navigate their learning with confidence. Explain whether you'll be on hand to answer questions or make prompts, or if you intend to only observe. Take a cue from your students as to how much involvement they need from you.

Work Together on Expectations

You may have expectations around student engagement that are at odds with what your cohorts are able to give.

Students should have autonomy over the way in which they learn. We've observed during a shift to online teaching that students are reluctant to switch their webcam on during online classes, for example. When faced with friction between your expectations and the student's behaviour, start a conversation around the problem, and find a consensus to agree on the solution together.

Asking students to participate in activities ahead of a lecture or seminar works best when you're clear on expectations from the start. Explain the requirements and discuss how you expect students to engage, and what will lead them to achieve success in the course.

Not all of the activities you plan will suit all students. Work together with your learning community to agree on a way they can comfortably navigate their learning tasks, in a way that helps all of them be successful.

Dr Wendy Garnham, Director Of Student Experience for the Central Foundation Years at the University of Sussex, agreed with her community the role she'd play when providing materials in Talis Elevate for students to read or watch. Wendy told us "I found that my role changed from cohort to cohort, with one class treating their Talis Elevate space as a 'domain of their own' whilst the following year, when the pandemic struck, students desired much more involvement from me."



3.

Find the Balance of the Blend



Flexibility is key. Embracing blended methodologies has been successful for many academics for many years, but only now is really becoming more commonplace.

Moving forwards, the blend needs to be the starting point, not an addition.

Consider Technological and Cognitive Bandwidth

Not all students will be able to engage with all synchronous activities. Reliance on one mechanism or approach will inevitably ostracise some of your community.

Challenge yourself on what activity needs to be delivered synchronously, what should be independent, collaborative, and assessed. We can't run at 100% cognitive bandwidth all the time, consider the ebbs and flows in your learning environment through a variety of learning activities. Again, think about the student journey when designing your course, and really think about the cadence of activity throughout your course.

Likewise, not everyone will be able to access tasks that require high powered computers or be able to purchase software licenses or online subscriptions. Technology should be an enhancement to learning, not create barriers.

Constructive Alignment

All activity we do within our learning communities should support the learning outcomes and align with the assessment, helping guide students through knowledge construction effectively. Be explicit and make direct statements describing how this activity will help with the assessment activity. It's good practice to badge the outcomes any activity supports, too.

Technology should be an enhancement to learning, not a barrier.



4.

Help Students Find Their Voice



For a learning community to thrive, we need to ensure that all members of it can get involved, contribute, and take something away from it. Educational dynamics can vary considerably, but we need to ensure that every student who wants to actively contribute has the means, the parameters, and the capability to do so.

Create an Inclusive Environment

It's important for students to feel they have the ability to find their voice within their learning community and can interact with their peers without fear of 'saying the wrong thing'. Help your students understand that there's really no such thing as a stupid question. If you can help your students realise this early and develop confidence in asking questions, asking for help, and supporting others, you will set up your community for greater collaboration.

Provide a Variety of Mediums

Reliance on one mechanism for collaboration could mean that some students get left behind. Not all students feel confident to engage in every setting. Providing a variety of mechanisms to contribute to the learning community allows for variety in your practice, but also in communication and contribution to the community.

A very timely example is online lectures. It can provide a more accessible environment for students who are less confident in a classroom setting. By providing alternative methods, in this case, speaking out loud, or typing in a chat function, allows them to more freely contribute to the conversation.

Understand Their Barriers to Entry

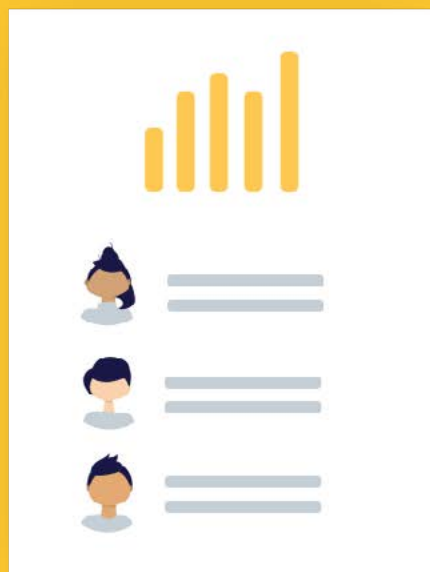
With the variety of tools and techniques we have at our disposal, we can start to unpick some of the barriers to entry for students to participate in the learning activity. Finding students are struggling to engage with course readings? Make it into a collaborative annotation task. Seeking to draw thoughts from the community on a sensitive subject? Utilise anonymous backchannels. To do this, you need to understand the barriers to entry for your students, so you can identify the most effective solutions that support your practice and community.

Providing alternative methods allows them to more freely contribute to the conversation.



5.

Continuously Improve and Adjust



It's ok if your initial plans for the shape of a course need to be amended. Accepting that things may need to change can be tough, but that doesn't necessarily mean a quantum shift. Sometimes, making small changes can have a massive impact. Acknowledge feedback, communicate clearly what you're changing, and outline why you've changed your approach.

Developing an engaged learning community means that you have a channel for dialogue and a culture of openness and honesty, allowing you to learn and evolve.

Analytics are useful for telling us how our students are engaging, but they tell us just one part of the story. 'Hidden engagement' can be multi-faceted, and overreliance on data can lead to missing the core problem opportunities on your courses.

Ask for Feedback

Create opportunities for your students to feedback qualitatively on the success and impact around the environment you've created together. Ask for feedback on what's working and not. Be open with your students around what you'd like feedback on, and what you're testing out.

This is valuable not just for encouraging reflection, but deepening the value of the learning community, and sparking some potential conversation. Bringing students along with you as you shape the course increases their feeling of ownership over it, and can lead to improved engagement.

Action the Feedback

Collecting feedback isn't enough. Build trust within your learning community by putting it into action.

When changing things, be transparent about your rationale. Students will feel empowered when they can make a real impact on their learning community.

Be Human

If you've got something wrong, or you're trying something new, be honest about it. If you expect students to be open and transparent in a learning space, set the example, you're just as much of the learning community as your students are.

Ask for
feedback on
what's working
and what's not.



Case Study: How Dr Wendy Garnham Built an Engaged Learning Community With Talis Elevate

Dr Wendy Garnham is the Director Of Student Experience (Foundation Year: Arts And Humanities, Social Sciences) and National Teaching Fellow at the University of Sussex. She's worked closely with students in their foundation year to build an engaged learning community, using tools like Talis Elevate to support her teaching and learning practice.

Here's how she's created her engaged learning community:

Setting Expectations

Wendy outlined clear principles within her community. For example, in the first teaching session of each module, the class together engaged with Talis Elevate to ensure that everyone knew how to post comments and make notes using this resource whilst help was immediately available where issues arose.

From that point on, students were requested to share their thoughts and raise questions about the weekly readings in Talis Elevate in advance of the seminar. This gave Wendy time to read, digest and personalise the content for each seminar enabling a more tailored approach to the teaching session. Talis Elevate is a collaborative resource engagement platform, allowing students to read, annotate, and have a discussion around their course materials together, all within the same system.

Providing Students with Choice

Wendy assigned students weekly readings but acknowledged that academic writing can be quite inaccessible for many of her students.

Where possible, she introduced alternative and/or supplementary content to read, watch or listen for her learning community. Using data around the student interaction, discussion, and private note-taking on these resources in Talis Elevate, Wendy observed some patterns around preference.

Working with her cohort, she fed this back to the community and had a discussion on the perceived value and impact of these materials, and she was able to adjust her approach for greater student engagement.

"Particularly during the pandemic, I noticed that students were engaging more with the additional readings and less with the video presentations that I added as supplementary material. This led to a discussion around the impact of online teaching sessions on preferences for the format of resources."

Wendy also extended this to new challenges, giving her students a choice about how to interact online. Many didn't feel comfortable having their webcams on during video classes, so the community agreed this would be optional, rather than an expectation and using innovative ice-breaker activities to help establish a sense of belonging alongside the community activity on Elevate building confidence in the process.



Case Study: How Dr Wendy Garnham Built an Engaged Learning Community With Talis Elevate

Lower Barriers to Entry

Wendy had found that students found weekly readings quite a challenge, often due to the perceived lack of knowledge. With a strong focus on collaborative learning during teaching sessions, historically we have still expected students to complete the weekly readings in isolation. By turning weekly reading into a collaborative annotation task, she was able to create a far more active environment, where students could bring their collective thoughts on the subject matter together in a variety of ways.

Provide a Variety of Mediums

Wendy utilised Talis Elevate as a platform for students to do their pre-seminar reading and discussion. It's a solution that allows for active online reading and engagement directly with the materials, privately, or with the class.

"Using Talis Elevate enabled students to raise questions anonymously if required so that it removed barriers due to feeling under-confident or not wanting to look silly in front of their peers. Instead, it fostered an atmosphere of collective belonging and support which in turn helped to lift confidence. When it then came to seminars, students of all abilities were able to contribute to and participate in the activities fully, allowing a rich and diverse discussion to evolve naturally."

Ask the Audience

By opening up dialogue with her students, Wendy was able to address the high priority questions that were widely misunderstood.

Wendy made this approach accessible in a shared location, which allowed everyone to gain the benefits of the conversation.

In some weeks, Wendy took a crowdsourcing approach, asking her students to draw on personal experiences around the scenarios discussed in the weeks reading or watching tasks. These perspectives then informed deeper discussion in a live seminar setting.

Students Engage in Many Ways

By Talis Elevate analytics, Wendy was able to get a deeper insight into how her students were engaging with weekly activity. She found that many students were taking lots of private notes but not engaging in the conversation in Talis Elevate. Both approaches count as 'engagement', but the private note-taking would have gone unnoticed if not for the ability to review the analytics.

In some cases, students are shown as 'not engaging at all' in Talis Elevate analytics. Wendy used this as an opportunity to check in on their well-being and provide targeted support and advice.

"This ability to monitor students' engagement through the use of Talis analytics meant that for students who had forgotten how to use or access the Talis Elevate resource, I could then reach out to them early on to resolve any issues meaning that they were immediately enveloped back into the learning community without delay."

Ready to Learn More?

Set up a 30-minute call with us to explore how you could implement Talis Elevate to build effective learning communities, as well as improve student engagement with resources.

[Book a chat >](#)

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