Australian *Flexible* **Learning** Framework

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

From Lurkers to Posters

November 2004

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Introduction

Cast your mind back to a learning environment where you were among the participants. It may be from your primary or secondary schooling days, or perhaps more recently in as an adult learner in your workplace or a Vocational Education and Training (VET) organisation. Think back to your fellow students. Each among us would remember the students always keen to have their hand in the air ready to answer the questions posed, or the students who spent a lot of time talking quietly or exchanging notes. Remember the shy student who dreaded the teacher calling on them to participate? And of course, those students who avoided openly participating at all and sat quietly determined to steer clear of the teacher's notice.

Our online learning communities are not so different to the classrooms of our youth – all the personalities we remember from the past are present in online learning communities. The purpose of this paper is to look at that group of participants who, for one reason or another, either do not contribute in public online discussions or whose interaction is infrequent. Furthermore this paper will provide strategies for actively engaging these participants. (A quick reference guide of these strategies is located at the end of this document.)

This group of people have, for the want of a better term, been described in the literature as 'lurkers' (Nonnecke, Preece, Andrews, Vontour, Bowes, Rafaeli). While alternative descriptors have been provided by Salmon ('browser'), McDonald ('legitimate peripheral participant'), Williams (ROPs -Read Only Participants) and Lee ('vicarious learner') it is not our intention here to debate the merit of the word 'lurker' to describe this cohort. We will use the term 'lurker' because readers will, in most probability, be familiar with the word.

Current Literature

An internet search of the term 'Lurkers' yielded surprisingly limited responses with only two Australian papers (Bowes & McDonald). The search identified the principal writers in this area as Blair Nonnecke, Jenny Preece, Dorine Andrews and Gilly Salmon.

Nonnecke, Preece and Andrews have jointly conducted research into why lurkers lurk and what lurkers and posters[1] think of each other. In 2001 Nonnecke et al conducted in-depth telephone interviews with 10 online group members (five male/five female) across a broad age range (early 20s to early 50s) from a university setting. Their findings supported suggestions that lurking is a common activity in online groups and that the asynchronous groups have lurking rates around 75%. Reasons for lurking were varied with participants citing 79 reasons (see discussion *'Why Lurkers Lurk'*). Nonnecke et al conducted further research in 2003 broadening the base and using an online survey that generated 1188 responses of which 18.45% were lurkers. This survey examined the behaviour and attitudes of participants who posted and those who, in their opinion, lurked[2]. However, like Katz and Rafaeli, this research is based on visitations to large sites with open forums such as AOL, MSN and Slashdot. In fact Nonnecke in 2004(a) defined the sampling framework as a community containing more than fifty members and open to public participation. Is this research relevant to closed learning communities established for the delivery of accredited VET programs? We believe that, despite the differences in the size of the communities, each have learning as the underpinning goal (informal and formal) and as such the outcomes of the studies conducted by Nonnecke can provide insights to assist us to better understand why lurkers lurk and to develop strategies to engage them in the learning.

Gilly Salmon on the other hand has written extensively on e-moderation and the skills required of online facilitators and trainers who work with learners online. Clearly her educational focus enables her observations on lurking and lurkers to be more readily applied to the context of VET programs in Australia.

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[1] Posters are described as the active participants in online discussion lists.

[2] For the purposes of this research, Nonnecke, Preece and Andrews, 2004, p. 1) defined lurking as 'those who had never posted in the community at any time.

Who Is A Lurker?

Rafaeli (2004, p2) notes that dictionary definitions usually describe lurking as 'lying in wait, often with malicious intent.' However he found a definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary that may align more closely to our understanding of lurking in the context of online communities. This source defined the verb 'lurk' as "to persist in staying".

The literature provides further definitions of lurking in the context of online environments and communities:

'No messages sent during a three month period' (Nonnecke, 2000)

'those not counted by their metered engagement, interactions, contributions in number of quality posts or interactions' (in McDonald, 2003, p.74)

'regular visits to the community but reticence or very seldom posting' (Rafaeli et al, 2004 p. 1)

'a persistent but silent audience' (Rafaeli et al, 2004 p. 2)

'members who had never posted in a community at any time.' (Nonnecke et al 2004(a), p. 2)

'one who posts occasionally or not at all but is known to read the group's postings regularly' (Jargon Dictionary in Nonnecke & Preece, 2001, p. 2)

'one who posts infrequently or not at all' (Nonnecke & Preece, 2001 p. 2)

'someone initially reluctant to commit themselves fully to public participation in conferencing' (Salmon, 2003 p.36)

'peripheral participation, done until a topic of interest is spotted' (Whittaker in Rafaeli, 2004 p. 3)

Bowes (2002 p.74) offers two descriptors: the active lurker who responds privately to messages posted and/or passes information on to others (eg using email), and the passive lurker who reads but never participates. The common thread in these definitions

is the level of participation. For the purposes of this discussion, and remembering the educational context in which we wish to consider the question of lurking, we accept the definition offered by Nonnecke & Preece (2001) that a lurker is someone who, in public forums 'posts infrequently or not at all'.

Characteristics of Lurkers

Preece et al (2003) undertook a comparison of the demographics of lurkers and posters in the 1188 survey responses (refer above "*Current Literature"*). She concluded that the two groups were very similar; lurking was not higher among a particular age group, sex, education level or dependent on employment status. Further her analysis identified that both posters and lurkers go online for similar reasons – usually to improve their understanding of a topic – and both value privacy and security.

What then characterises a lurker? Katz (1998) found that lurkers:

- are less hostile than posters,

- are more tolerant to open discussion,

- are technically sophisticated,

- are uncomfortable with language that demonstrates disrespect and/or hostility, and

- feel alone in their opinions and feel isolated.

McDonald (2003, p. 4) states that 'lurkers or peeps try to remain back, distill many opinions and learn via cross-osmosis (peeping without stopping to speak)…' As such, lurkers are characterised as people preferring not to engage in hasty conversation until they have synthesised their views and considered their argument or position in relation to the debate.

Nonnecke et al (2004) noted that while posters were frequently attracted to extrovert activities, lurkers demonstrate more introvert behaviour – not publicly asking questions but wanting answers, observation rather than contribution. Lurkers are more likely to be shy and lack confidence; feeling incompetent to post. In another study (Morris et al in Nonnecke and Preece 2001), lack of confidence among lurkers led to them exhibiting 'the kind of passivity commonly associated with TV viewers' whereby they were willing to

absorb information but not adept at providing feedback and contributing to the online community.

A less positive view of lurking is provided by Kollock and Smith (in Refaeli, 2004). They characterise lurkers as free-riders – taking from the community but not contributing to it. However Nonnecke (2004) found that there is little resentment towards lurkers by posters, and this association may be inaccurate.

Why Lurkers Lurk

Nonnecke et al (2004(a)) found that lurkers and posters have the same motivations to join online communities – for personal reasons primarily (92.6%), followed by work (5.9%) and school (1.5%) and aim to obtain a 'better understanding' through additional sources of information. Yet what differentiates the 'lurker' from the 'poster'? Based on recent research Nonnecke et al (2004(a)) provide a comprehensive list of reasons provided by lurkers for their actions. Respondent lurkers could cite multiple reasons for lurking. While this research was based on large, public, online communities, many of the reasons cited will resonate with us as online facilitators:

- Just reading/browsing is enough   (57.0%)
- Still learning about the group   (29.7%)
- Shy about posting   (28.3%)
- Nothing to offer   (22.8%)
- No requirements to post   (21.5%)
- Others respond the way I would   (18.7%)
- Want to remain anonymous   (15.1%)
- Had no intention to post to this group   (13.2%)
- Of no value to me   (11.0%)
- Not enough time to post   (9.1%)
- Do not know how to post to this group   (7.8%)
- Poor quality of messages or group   (7.8%)
- Wrong group for me   (7.3%)

- Long delay in response to postings   (6.8%)

- Concern about aggressive or hostile responses   (5.9%)

- There are too many messages already   (4.6%)

- If I post, I am making a commitment   (4.1%)

- Group treats members badly   (1.4%)

- My work does not allow posting   (1.4%)

- Other   (18.7%)

The first five responses were indicated by 20% of the lurkers in the survey. Between 10% and 20% of the group included the next four items and fewer than 10% chose the remaining items. The comment that 'Just reading/browsing is enough' will be discussed below *'Are Lurkers Learning?'*. Let's review some of the other high response rates.

The comment 'Still learning about the group' (29.7%) suggests that lurking may be a temporary period of non-posting that occurs on joining a group, and that once this period is over, lurkers may become posters. Lurking is a way of coming up to speed with an online group without putting oneself at risk. This is a view shared by Salmon (2003). She in fact encourages lurking for a while as a first step towards becoming part on an online e-conference and concludes that lurking/browsing before contributing is perfectly normal behaviour (much the same as browsing while shopping).

The third most cited reason, 'shy about posting' suggests that self confidence is important for a person to put themselves forward and make postings. Among any group of participants you are likely to find those more introverted than others, and some who exhibit high levels of shyness – the challenge in online learning communities is to be able to 'see' this cohort and support their learning. Shyness may also be related to finding an identity within a group – particularly an existing group where the dynamics and relationships are well developed. Salmon (2003, p. 123) notes that late starters in online communities are more likely to report passive engagement than early starters and considerable amounts of time are needed to get used to communicating online – perhaps an even greater challenge for a naturally shy person.

For a person to comment 'No requirement to post', Nonnecke implies that the person knows and understands the implicit and explicit rules of the community. This may occur

through specific information provided by the community (Frequently Asked Questions or induction information) or the person may assume knowledge based on experiences in previous communities. Either way, this response questions the role of the community as a means of communication between members and not just a one-way flow of information from the facilitator to the members. Is the community providing for the needs of the lurker as they feel 'no requirement to post' or are the group dynamics disengaging the lurker?

It is interesting that only 13.2% of respondents to Nonnecke's survey indicated that they intended to lurk from the outset. Nonnecke et al (2004(b) p. 2692) suggests that 'lurking is either a post-joining strategy where needs may be met through activities such as reading/browsing) **or** members become lurkers in direct and sometimes negative response to the community and to a lesser extent the communication technology.' The remaining items in the list include many negative responses. These may be summarised as:

- Is there value in participation?

  (Nothing to offer/Others respond the way I do)

- Is there is mismatch with the community?

  (Of no value to me/Wrong group for me)

- Quality of Community:

  (Poor quality of message or group/Long delays in response to postings/Too many messages/Group treats new members badly)

- Technology/Literacy issues :

  (Don't know how to post)

The remaining items contained in the list relate to external constraints (My work does not allow posting/Not enough time to post). Obviously, as online facilitators the strength of these negative comments leads us to think about strategies we may use to engage participants in online learning communities.

Are Lurkers Learning?

Adult learning principles tell us that learning can occur informally and formally, in a variety of settings and is highly contextualised to the needs of the participant. In the public online communities that have formed the basis for much of the research referred to in this paper, the participant determines what information is needed, when and in what format. This scenario is similar to a help-desk situation. Contrast this to online learning communities in the Australian VET sector where participants are usually in small private groups, the learning is managed (especially in the early stages) by a facilitator and the participant is often required to undertake assessment if formal recognition of competencies is required.

To be able to answer the question 'Are Lurkers Learning?' would be a thesis in itself. Our intention here is to offer four perspectives for you to consider in your own learning communities. Lee and McKendree (1999) present an argument that lurkers, as persons not directly participating in the online discussion, will directly benefit from observing the learning of another student's learning experiences and being able to relate it to their own. Lee and McKendree describe this as 'vicarious learning' (1999, p. 1). It is often the case that several students will have similar/related needs of the online facilitator. Where one student posts a question and discussion ensues, the lurker, having the same information need, will learn from observing the online discussion. In their opinion, lurkers can receive benefits from exposure to discussions among their peers and between other participants and facilitators. In these instances the lurker directly learns through participation but remains invisible to the group. As an alternative to active, personal engagement in discussion, Lee and McKendree believe that being able to observe peer dialogues can provide a useful source of learning, both cognitively (increased knowledge and understanding) and socially (positive feelings of being part of a community). While this feeling of community membership contradicted the findings on Nonnecke et al (2004), Lee and McKendree conducted their research in smaller, closed communities in a university setting and as such may be more relevant to our context.

Draper (1997) while agreeing in part with Lee and McKendree offers a view that there are three distinct sources of maximising learning value for participants in online communities:

- The value of reading, skimming or overhearing others' inputs.

- Value of generating a contribution because the value to the contributor of generating a contribution is a learning experience in itself. So the learning is linked with the formulation of the response and the physical act of making the response.

- The value of receiving others' responses to one's own contributions.

The lurker may in fact be missing out on the value of the learning associated with the last two points This view is supported by McDonald (2003 p 2) and by Rafaeli (2004). Where Lee and McKendree focus on information and knowledge, Draper, McDonald and Rafaeli acknowledge the importance of learning within the social context of the group and are of the opinion that lurkers do not have the benefit of these essential learning experiences. Rafaeli describes the value that such connection between the members of the community brings to both the individual and the community as a whole as 'social capital' and 'reading and posting in a forum creates a social network, where all participants, both active and passive, acquire social capital by getting access to valuable information, learning the social norms of the community and getting to know active participants' (Rafaeli, 2004, p. 4). In our small, closed, online learning communities the opinions of the lurkers are often important and community members lose much by not 'hearing' these thoughts.

The final author to challenge our thinking is Gulati (2004) who advocates the use of online collaborations for constructivist learning. Constructivist learning links the importance of real-life situations as the main learning contexts, as distinct from conventional adult education where the participants are passive recipients of knowledge imparted by the teacher. Constructivist thinkers conclude that a large amount of adult learning is informal and maintain that learner-control, learning in real-life contexts, flexibility in learning, freedom to choose learning resources and openness to discussing issues are present to maximise the learning opportunity. Discussion, interaction, adaptation and reflection are key elements for learning to occur. So, from this stance, do lurkers learn? Constructivist thinkers answer 'yes', as the online lurkers process ideas gained from reading others discussions and that low visible participation does not imply less engagement in learning. 'In fact the active learners may participate at the expense of their reflection time, and it is possible the silent learners are more engaged.' (Beaudoin, in Gulati 2004 p.6).

Gulati concludes that 'there needs to be an acknowledgement that some individuals may be learning informally and silently, not visible to online facilitators. Secondly, facilitators of online learning experiences need to enable informal and trustworthy learning spaces, where participants feel confident and supported in working on their own and with each other. Thirdly, informality in online learning needs to be fostered and realised.' (p. 10).

What are our responsibilities as online facilitators? We cannot simply assume that a lurker is learning informally and silently; we do not know them personally, we cannot observe them in the physical sense absorbed in the learning activities. We believe that the facilitator has a responsibility to communicate privately with lurkers to identify if they are lurking for any of the negative reasons stated above by Nonnecke (2004). Based on our own experiences it is our opinion that lurkers frequently are disengaged from the learning and require the support of the facilitator. We are also of the opinion that participating in online communities encourages social capital and should be fostered. Discussion and sharing experiences are two of the most effective means by which adults learn.

Finally, while we have been discussing the lurker as a learner, we should not overlook those active members of the online community – the posters. Does lurking activity affect the learning of the posters? Clearly, the more lurking that occurs within an online community, the less feedback the posters receive and the more likelihood that the posters will become disenchanted with the community and leave. Salmon (2003, p. 123) states that there is no doubt more active members become upset with lurkers. Posters require a diversity of feedback to challenge their views and support the cornerstones of learning from the constructivist view – discussion, interaction, adaptation and reflection.

Moving Lurkers to Posters

Most often people come to an online community for information and the wish to contribute may take some time to develop. Our aim is to establish a supportive online community where contributions from the participants are encouraged and where participants feel their contributions are valued. There is no magic answer to engage all lurkers – you will need to develop a repertoire of strategies drawing on your intuition and improvising as required. Our intention here is to offer suggestions that will minimise the reasons for lurking as described by Nonnecke et al (2004a) above *'Why Lurkers Lurk'*. Based on our own experiences and drawing on specific examples from the literature, the

following strategies are suggested to move lurkers to posters in online learning communities.

- The **facilitator must model the behaviour** she/he will expect of the participants. It is critical that the facilitator accesses the site frequently to motivate the participants to review material. The lurker will not be motivated to access the site frequently if the information is not changing. The facilitator cannot simply assume the materials used successfully in a classroom will be equally appropriate and stimulating to an online community. Nonnecke (2004a) noted that lurkers have high information expectations from their online communities and, while not publicly asking questions, want detailed answers. Therefore, a facilitator needs to be well prepared with a breadth of information available/accessible including well researched web resources. For further information about best practice in online facilitation see the "Effective Online Facilitation" guide available at http://flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/facilitation.pdf.

- As would occur in a traditional classroom, **use a variety of delivery methods to engage participants**: role plays, synchronous and asynchronous discussion, personal journals, a public area for written comments. Structured activities provide focus for participants and are especially important in the early stages of forming the online community. Research has identified that lurking occurs infrequently in synchronous discussion communications. Make sure current news items or new web sites can be gathered for all participants to share and access.

- **Provide clear expectations of participants** and a set of clear norms and standards for sharing information (see McDonald 2003). By doing this, people considering joining the community know what is expected. However, we do not support a blanket 'No lurking allowed' as has been found on some sites. All interested parties should be encouraged and lurking on the periphery of the community prior to posting would be considered normal behaviour.

- **Display a clear statement of purpose** for the group and articulate the community's goals. This area of your site could **include a detailed course syllabus**. By doing so should avoid people entering the community and finding it was of 'no value' or 'not a good one for me', two reasons cited by lurkers to Nonnecke (2004) for lurking rather than participating.

- **Include a privacy statement up-front**. Privacy is an issue for some lurkers (see Nonnecke 2004a) and by issuing a privacy statement, fears can be alleviated.

- **Provide technology induction**. Nonnecke (2004) recorded that 7.8% of the lurkers were unable to post because they 'did not know how to post to the group'. The ability to use the technology may vary between groups (eg between a group undertaking a course in computer programming compared to a person undertaking a Certificate I program. 'Non-technically sophisticated communities may be more affected' states Preece (2003) and those facilitators need to 'understand the capabilities of both their audiences and the community tools chosen for the community'. How many times do we as facilitator in online learning communities assume the participant is technologically savvy? What induction do we provide into the learning environment and in what format?

- **Create a special welcome area** in the community as a safe place for lurkers to visit to become familiar with the group. Preece (2003, p. 18) suggests that established **members could be encouraged to take on the role of the 'greeter'**. This area could **include frequently asked questions** but the welcome site would not include debate or arguments. Preece (2003) suggests **a clear policy statement** for example: 'We welcome your participation. Our community exists because members contribute ideas, comments and questions, so please join in the discussion'. She further suggests that such a statement should be visible at all times as lurkers (and posters alike) do not actively search for pages describing policies.

- **Offer mentoring partnerships** in which lurkers are gradually introduced to the group through a mentor and small group activities. This way the lurker will have support as they learn about the community and its norms. More on online mentoring can be found at http://flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/onlinementoring.pdf.

- Pay special attention to **acknowledging and responding to new members promptly** (one author suggests within 2-4hours). Lurking is higher in communities that do not respond to new posters (Nonnecke et al, 2001). Gilly Salmon in recent research has identified the number one reason for teachers and students logging on to an online learning platform is to find out if anyone has

replied to their postings. Facilitators are responsible for ensuring that messages receive responses. This may occur directly by the facilitator responding or the facilitator may 'steer' the message to a member of the community. Salmon (2002) supports this view and adds that **summarising information** is also an important role for the facilitator to assist the lurker to hone in on relevant information.

- As the facilitator, **avoid answering all the questions**. Such a lecturing approach will simply encourage participants to sit back and wait for the answers. Nola Campbell uses the '4 before me' rule – as the facilitator, let four other participants make postings before posting yourself.

- As the facilitator **seed discussion** (especially useful in the early stages as the group is forming or when the group goes through quiet times). Rafaeli (2004 p. 8) suggests that social events (eg: a sweep for the Melbourne Cup) during discussion or introducing controversial content can be a real catalyst for motivating lurkers to post.

- Nonnecke & Preece (2001), Whittaker (1998), Rafaeli (2004) and Salmon (2003) agree that the volume of messages, the topic and the number of topics/threads may have an effect on lurking. Group information overload causes users to read less and to acquire less social capital through having less in common with each other. It is for the facilitator to carefully manage these activities to **avoid situations where participants disengage because of the growing complexity of the discussions**. Sometimes it may be useful **to divide participants into smaller groups** to discuss topic and then for a nominee to post a summary for the entire group to share. Alternatively, to simplify interactions, participants may be simply asked to add a vote to the opinions with which they agree (see Preece, 2004).

- **Strong moderation** on the part of the facilitator to prevent mocking and aggressive comments. The facilitator needs to model **the use of appropriate tone and language** – a skill that may take some time to develop. Salmon (2003) highlights the importance of monitoring the tone and language used as our communications do not have the benefit of body language to communicate our emotions.

- **Personal information pages**, possibly including photographs and personal items contributed by yourself, as a role model, and the participants (eg: photo, poem, favourite quote) may encourage newcomers to feel 'connection' to the group.

- **Ice-breakers** initiated by the facilitator can by used to get the group 'talking'. Topics for discussion need to be non-threatening with participants being gently drawn into the conversations. For lurkers and new members, this provides a way to test the waters without having to post.

- As the facilitator, **create opportunities for newcomers to join conversations** by connecting them to tasks to be done, **introducing them to a 'buddy' or asking specific questions** in an area where they may hold expertise. Where the online learning community is an integral part of professional development in the workplace, established experts can advise newcomers and may be a way of transferring knowledge. Older, retired personnel may be an excellent source of mentors for younger, less experienced employees and can perform this role from the comfort of their own home. However, we would caution allowing newcomers into an online learning program too far into the course as the newcomer could feel overwhelmed and resort to lurking.

- **Ask participants personally to engage in seeking information, summarising discussions and other self-directed activities**. Where the group has progressed beyond community building, participants can be encouraged to take responsibility for seeding discussion - but don't let a few voices dominate. These types of activities appeal to more introverted people and by structuring the learning to include these strategies, lurkers will feel supported and may become posters.

- **Contact participants who have not posted their first message** to identify if there are problems (technical problems, family crisis, course issues, vacation). We recommend using the telephone as the preferred method of contact and personal email as a second choice. Our rule-of-thumb is where the message is of a personal nature (eg: questioning the participant's behaviour), use the telephone not an email.

- **Dominant contributors need to be 'managed'** to allow shyer participants to post. It is important to acknowledge the contribution made by these dominant contributors at the same time tactfully directly the discussion to others, particularly lurkers. For example, post a message 'Thanks XXX , that is a very valuable contribution. Now, what do others think?' Nonnecke (2001 and 2004a) found clear evidence from interviews that for some lurkers, dominance by a few was off putting.

- In larger online communities, **using tracking tools can identify lurkers** and the facilitator can send individual messages to lurkers encouraging them to contribute. In smaller communities that we are more familiar with, lurking becomes quite obvious and the facilitator can intervene more quickly to encourage participation.

- **Organise online guest events** using external 'experts' or drawing on the members as guests. Guest presenters may be available during particular time periods over an extended time (eg: anytime within a 48 hour period or one week). Refer to Bowes for further information. This strategy, by including different 'voices' and potentially renowned thinkers may encourage lurkers to interact.

- **Running a contest** to encourage posting may move lurkers to posting. However, be careful in framing the 'rules' of the contest – do not base rewards on the number of postings as there may be a flood of responses. 'Quality' rather than 'quantity' may be the key and winners may be selected by peers, a panel or an external party. Remember to provide good prizes that are relevant to your audience and forum topic – transporting bottles of wine can be awkward. We decided once to offer a contest with the prize being vouchers to movie tickets. The idea seemed simple but we were stumped when the 'winner' was from interstate in an isolated part of Australia!

- Preece suggests **rewarding 'quality' contributions** by posting these entries in a conspicuous place on the site. However, the determination of a 'quality' contribution may be open to interpretation and this strategy may be more useful once the online community has settled-in.

Both Williams (2004) and Salmon (2003) raise the question of using 'sticks' as strategies to boost participation, encourage postings and subsequently reduce lurking. Among the

'sticks' suggested is the inclusion of learners' participation in the formal assessment processes. If we are convinced that collaboration is an integral part of the learning process, then one way of giving learners an incentive to participate may be by assessing it but measuring participation in a transparent way is likely to be open to criticism for being subjective: if sheer volume of postings is the measurement, participants may post in a manner akin to earning frequent flyer points. Gulati (2004, p. 5), reports that, 'indeed in most online courses, despite compulsory requirement to contribute, many learners do not post messages as required but complete the course successfully.' If the facilitator believes as a critical element of learning the articulation of ideas is necessary, then compulsory contributions may be justified. The facilitator, in constructing the learning, must carefully consider the goals, objectives, rules, principles and intention of the online community as well as the content of the learning, and learners' capabilities before making that decision. Our view is that linking assessment to participation is not a strategy to be universally employed to draw out lurkers and building effective online communities. For instance, if the discussion board is to be assessed, carefully consider the best form of assessment. General discussion is difficult to assess both in a face-to-face environment and an online environment. The discussion board is better suited to assessment tasks such as debate and role-plays.

Other 'sticks' include:

- enforcing compulsory group working by making completion of projects impossible otherwise,

- posting relevant and useful information online for short periods of time and

- setting inflexible deadlines for submission of online work.

We are not convinced that the quality of learning outcomes will be enhanced by placing additional pressure on online learners, particularly a cohort that may be naturally shy, lacking confidence and possible experiencing technological challenges. Rather, more effort should be concentrated on developing more precise learning assessment tools (eg: portfolios, blogs) and evaluate outcomes rather than the process.

Rafaeli et al (2004 p. 7) suggested from a recent study 'De-lurking in Virtual Communities', that 'familiarity with the community and persistent involvement, contributes to eventual active participation in the virtual community life.' We recommend that you refer to references such as Salmon (2002, 2003), Johnson (2003) and

recourses located on http://resources.flexiblelearning.net.au for more strategies to effectively provide online facilitation and assessment.

While we have identified specific strategies to off-set the negative reasons provided in the research by Nonnecke et al (2004), the adoption of sound pedagogy should encourage posting rather than lurking. A *"Quick Reference Guide"* aligning strategies to reasons for lurking is provided at the end of this resource.

Conclusion

Is lurking dysfunctional? On the one hand lurking is a way of getting to know the online community and becoming an integral part of it. On the other hand, lurking is seen as a negative behaviour that can undermine the continuity of an online community. The current literature and anecdotal comments from online facilitators indicate that lurking ought not to be seen as a negative behaviour. Just as a teacher manages discussions and learning activities in the traditional classroom, so it is online. To assist us to put the overseas research into the Victorian VET context, we invited five online facilitators to consider Nonnecke's (2004a) findings regarding why lurkers lurk. They unanimously nominated the following three reasons as those given most frequently by students for lurking: 'shy about posting', 'others respond the way I would' and 'not enough time to post'. Only one facilitator noted that approximately 2% of lurkers would believe that they were learning effectively without posting. All agreed that direct, private contact with individual lurkers is their preferred strategy to draw out lurkers.

Remembering that lurking appears to be a developed habit (Nonnecke & Salmon) rather than a conscious decision from the outset, it is our responsibility to invest in a range of strategies to ensure that the online learning experiences we construct will engage all participants, enhance the learning outcomes and consequently discourage lurking. Salmon (2002, p. 47) offers the following insight to assist our thinking: 'In the physical world people can be there and look bored or interested; online they can be interested and undetected!'.

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Quick Reference Guide

Suggested Strategies to Address Common Reasons for Lurking in VET Online Communities

Strategy	Just reading /Browsing is enough	Still learning about the group	Shy about posting	No requirements to post	No intention to post	No value in participating	Mismatch with the community	Question the quality of the community	Technology/IT issues
Facilitator accesses site regularly						x	x	x	
Materials customised for community							x	x	
Use of role play	x		x	x	x				
Use of synchronous discussions	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	
Use of reflective journal	x	x	x						
Provision of reference lists/libraries		x					x	x	
Use of personal information page	x	x	x	x	x			x	
Use of icebreakers		x	x						x
Use direct contact phone/email	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Facilitator seeding discussion		x							
Facilitator manage dominant contributors			x			x		x	
Group members leading discussion	x	x	x	x	x				
Use of self-directed activities	x	x	x	x	x			x	
Use of online guest events	x			x	x			x	
Appoint a mentor to a lurker/newcomer	x	x	x			x	x	x	x
Use small Group activities	x		x	x	x			x	
Broadcast a privacy statement			x						
Facilitator Manages the volume of messages	x				x	x		x	
Clear expectations and standards are provided on the website	x			x	x		x		
Quality contributions are rewarded	x		x	x	x	x		x	
All participants received Induction (including technology)	x		x	x	x				x
Facilitator promptly responds to postings				x	x	x		x	
A statement of purpose/ community goals is provided on the website	x			x		x	x		
Contests are used to stimulate posting	x	x	x	x	x			x	
Assessment requirements are linked to participation	x	x	x	x	x	x			