

Creating Successful Social, Online Communities

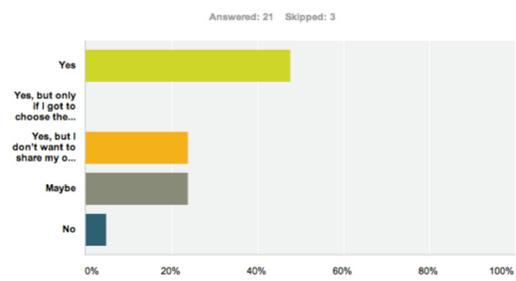
Theory

- Online communities must create a Community of Practice (CoP) where individuals relate through mutual engagement, joint enterprises, and shared beliefs.¹
- CoPs and their communicative activities allow people to take control, direct, and manage their own learning.²
- "Group collaboration is one of the most powerful facets of online learning...As participants share and collaborate, the final result can be not only more comprehensive than what is typically offered by a single participant, but there is more investment in the final outcome when we invite contributions from the full group."³
- Educators must effectively craft a "Community of Inquiry,"³ which incorporates social, teaching, and cognitive elements in order to create an effective online learning environment.
- When developing an online community, the framework must consider the dichotomous nature of group dynamics.
- Online communities are complex forces that bring about systematic dualities that in turn stimulate contact, collaboration, and learning.²
- There are 6 principle dualities: designed/emergent; participation/reification; identification/negotiation; local/global; coherence/diversity; and online/face-to-face. The dualities must be balanced and leveraged from within the group rather than through design principles.⁴
- However, the design of a virtual environment must set the stage for members to make social connections.

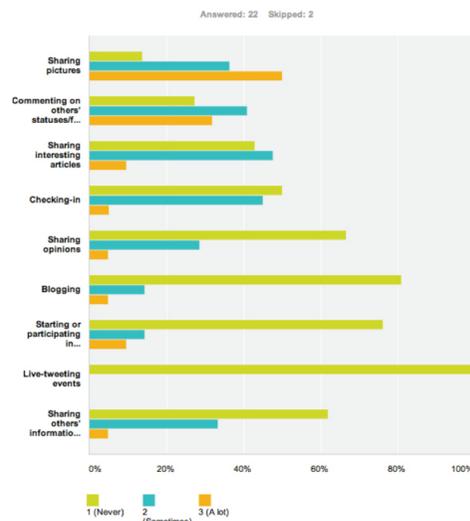
Preliminary Survey Results

A Preliminary Survey was sent out to all ATs to assess need.

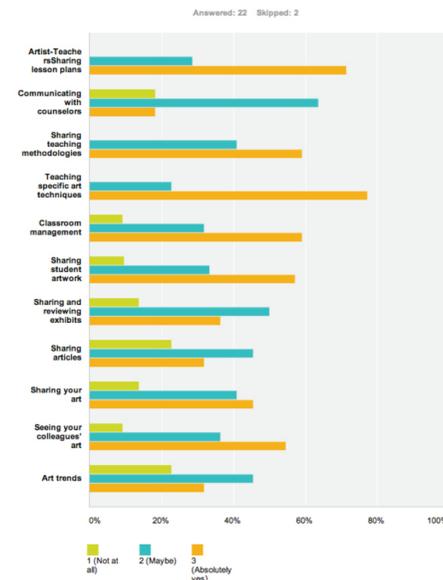
Would you participate by voluntarily sharing lesson plans, student/personal artwork, reflections, or organized art critiques of your own/peer artwork?



What activities or behaviors do you find yourself participating in the most on your preferred social network?



What topics or themes would you like connect with your JMF Artist-Teacher colleagues with? Please rate these options 1 (I don't want to do this at Please rate these options.



Further Reading

1. Wenger, Etienne. Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
2. Sasha A. Barab and James G. MaKinster and Rebecca Scheckler, "Designing System Dualities: Characterizing a Web-Supported Professional Development Company." The Information Society 19 (2003).
3. Crow, William B. and Herminia Din. Unbound By Place or Time: Museums and Online Learning. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2009.
4. Barab, Sasha A. "An Introduction to the Special Issue: Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning." The Information Society. 19 (2003).
5. Valone, Lauren, "Cooking Up a Virtual Community." Journal of Museum Education. 36.3 (Fall 2011) 279-287. Print.

Need for a Digital Platform at JMF & Preliminary Survey

Mission: *The Joan Mitchell Foundation celebrates the legacy of Joan Mitchell and expands her vision to support the aspirations and development of diverse contemporary artists. We work to broaden the recognition of artists and their essential contributions to communities and society.*

A guiding principle of the Joan Mitchell Foundation (JMF) is to be artist-centered; one of the many ways this is internally exemplified is through their in-depth professional development for their employee Artist-Teachers (ATs). JMF administrators had previously experimented with online forums, but were not entirely successful because it mixed ATs' professional and personal goals within connections and did not have proactive communications out to participants. Based on previous observations, the JMF team noted that the ATs found value in sharing their experiences, lesson plans, and other reflections. The creation of a the JMF Teacher's Lounge online community addressed this need by cultivating a shared and assessable space that continues to encourage an exchange of ideas and resources to support teaching practices.

Preliminary Survey Outcomes

- The ATs wanted more opportunities to informally connect with one another.
- The ATs were fluent in online social media, and they were willing to try using the Teacher's Lounge portal.
- The survey helped determine how to give the ATs ownership of the Teacher Portal because ATs knew that their needs were being considered and therefore became more invested in this new program.
- Three ATs were then identified to be paid beta-testers, and ultimately Teacher's Lounge advocates.

Determining the Platform

Because the purpose of the digital program was to support an already existing, exclusive group, the platform required privacy settings so that it was only viewable to the JMF community. It was also important that all ATs were able to create their own profile so they could be identified/reached virtually and in-person, as well as to make deeper connections with one another.

We considered:

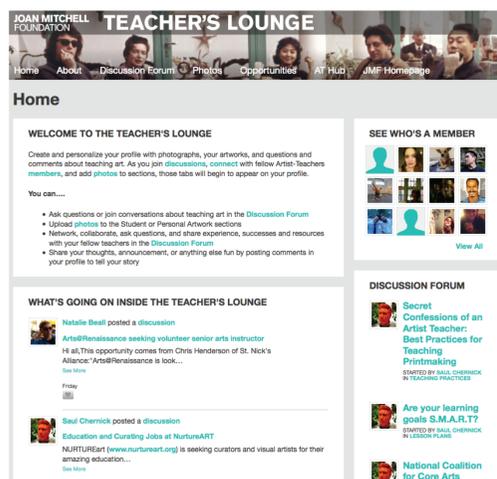
- WordPress: <http://en.wordpress.com/classrooms/>, free
- Ning: <http://www.ning.com/>, Pricing varies – Plus option is \$24.95/month
- Hoop.la: <http://www.hoop.la/>, Standard Plan (no ads) is \$99/month

We found that Ning met our needs as it provided the following:

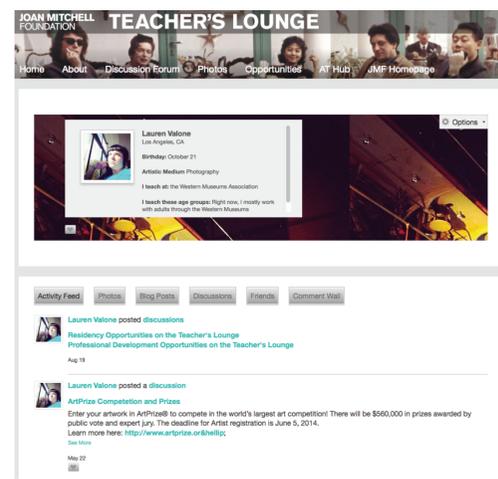
- Members could create their own profiles,
- Members could join on-going discussion topics, discussion forums, chats, specific affinity groups, event listings, media postings
- There was an activity stream
- Mobile friendly

Between the time that the project was scoped out and purchasing a Ning plan, the Ning platform changed from Ning 2.0 to Ning 3.0, drastically altering the functionality of our original design for the Teacher's Lounge.

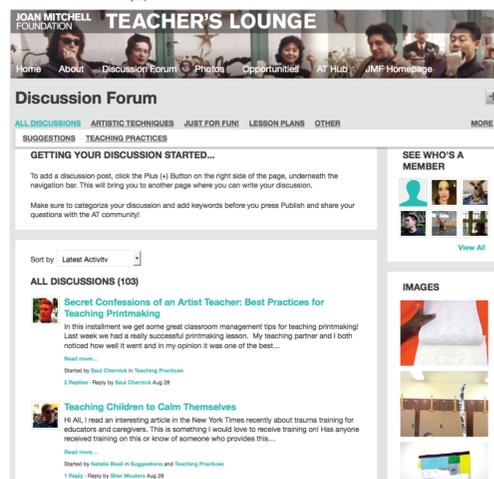
Screenshots of Portal



Landing page giving participants multiple navigation options



Personal profile page to share status updates and connect with others on an individual level

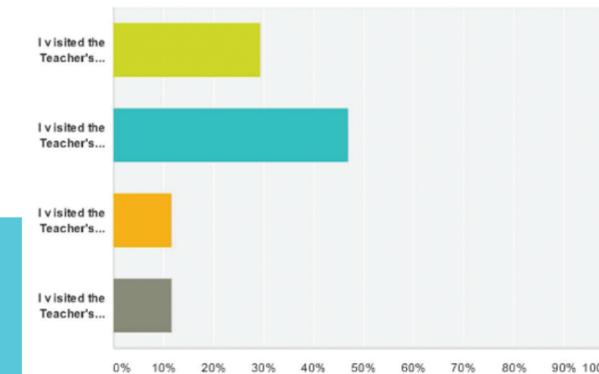
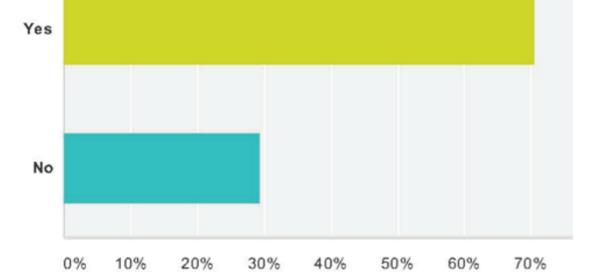


Discussion Forum broken out into topics for easier searchability

One-Year Survey Results

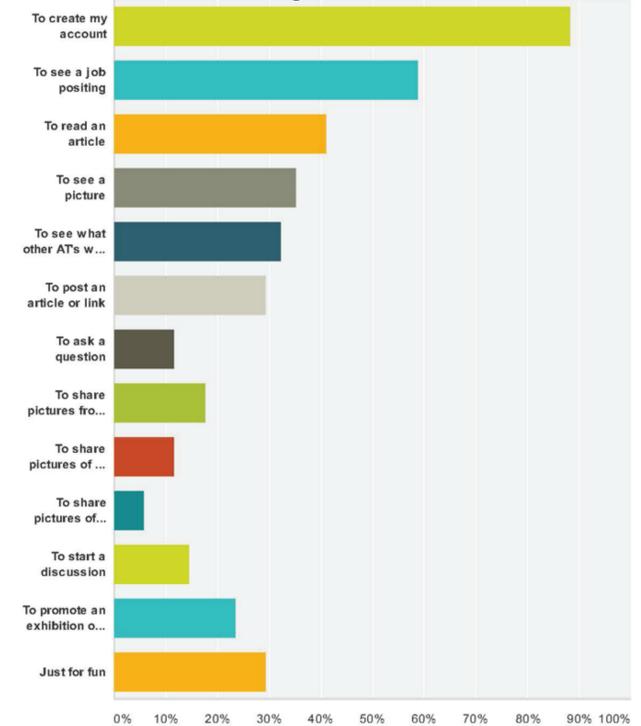
A second survey was administered to ATs after the Teacher's Lounge had been active for one year.

When asked if they had posted in the Teacher's Lounge, 70.59% of respondents said yes.



Answer Choices	Responses
I visited the Teacher's Lounge 1-3 times this year	29.41%
I visited the Teacher's Lounge 1-3 times per term	47.06%
I visited the Teacher's Lounge 1-3 times per month	11.76%

Respondents were asked about their interactions with the Teacher's Lounge:



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Lessons Learned

- Scheduled email prompts are a must! Participation in the Teacher's Lounge asked ATs to change their normal web behavior; there was and still is a need to reinforce activities and contribution.
- It is important to have dedicated users and administrators that are continually posting, commenting, and adding content. In the case of JMF, paid beta-testers were integral when initiating the Teacher's Lounge and have since continued to be some of the major advocates and contributors. Likewise, a JMF administrator continuously adds content, and the JMF team is planning to hire an intern to take on this responsibility.
- It is easy to fall into the habit of only considering design and functionality when forming an online community; however sociability and community interactions must be at the forefront.
- The Teacher's Lounge was successful because there was an existing close and committed community established between the ATs and JMF. Make sure to reinforce the community in as many ways as possible.
- It is important for program developers to meet with users of the platform in person. Prior to the first survey, there were multiple meetings with ATs to find out what exactly they wanted from the platform. Having conversations in addition to surveys helped identify key areas of interest.
- Make sure to respect member voices as much as administrators, which allows for the freedom of ideas, content, and institutional information to flow between all parties.
- Make sure to test your navigation among users. The One-Year Survey yielded many enlightening comments, particularly about usability issues, that were not visible to those involved in building the site.
- Platforms change. If you are not building a proprietary site, then it can be expected that a universal online site will evolve. This happened during the production stage of the Teacher's Lounge causing alterations to the structure of the community in order to accommodate those unexpected changes.