

**What makes posts  
(such as blog posts, posts in communities, and so on)  
valuable?**

Thanks to *Barb McDonald, Brenda Kaulback, Brian J. McNely, Christina Merl, Jas Darrah, Jenny Mackness, John D. Smith, Joitske Hulsebosch, Tony Burgess (also Nancy Dixon and his CompanyCommand colleagues), VMaryAbraham and others who may join this conversation in the future.*

Some patterns I have noticed in responses to date. Bold and italicized fonts are added to increase emphasis.

A few people with lots of experience said something like **interesting/great/important question**. This leads me to think that we can benefit from being more reflexive about improving in our online work. It was evident from replies such as Jenny's that this question matters: "I work online all the time, as an online facilitator for HE courses in the UK, so this question is one I am always asking myself. What will my students find meaningful or valuable?"

There were comments I think relate to **authenticity**. Often there is a "feel" to a post that is done out of duty, or isn't done in the spirit of sharing. We appreciate contributions that are—as John worded it—*bright cheerful* or *generous* rather than *grumpy* or *just trudging through it*. Although I noted that some forms of negative energy can be compelling and valuable.

Even in the context of serious learning, I noticed a **paradox around focus and alignment** in relation to value. Brian and others noted that it is valuable to see posts, tweets or other sorts of contributions that fit with what we "happen to be researching and/or interested in at a given moment." Brenda used the criterion "if a post responds creatively or substantively to the purpose." And yet there as also—as Mary said—"The serendipity of discovering something you never knew from so many unexpected sources." Brenda also identified the importance of knowledge "which could not have been predicted" emerging, and gave concrete examples from this dialogue about valuable posts.

This paradox can be teased out by thinking about different tools and platforms. Joitske wrote that in CPSquare—a community of practice about communities of practice—she wants to improve her understanding of the field. But with twitter and blogs she wrote: "it's different- I am happy with new connections or pointers to unexpected resources- so it's more serendipity." She differentiated Facebook and a similar Dutch network as friendship-oriented places to connect with old acquaintances.

Regardless of whether they associated different elements of value to different tools, people did speak about different structural elements or layers associated with value. We work with multiple identities (especially if we work horizontally with multiple tools and communities). **Value varies with identities and roles**. Christina's comments were among those that described variation:

- "I guess it really depends on what you're looking for:  
a. useful information, *solutions to problems* and new insights (you can certainly get such in flourishing CoPs)

- b. quick information and pointers (twitter, fb...)
- c. infotainment (funny comments that contain valuable information though)
- d. entertainment (just for fun networks)
- e. comfort (somehow, if you seem stuck in a situation and realise other people are facing similar problems...something along these lines)
- f. jobs (!) (more and more through twitter & co")

In addition to this very concrete list about types of posts, Brenda adds that: "sometimes a poster offers a great *summary* of previous posts or highlights an issue in a humorous or catchy way - what I think of as a 'process post' - that is, the post doesn't necessarily add new content, but still moves the dialogue forward through making me see what has been said with new eyes."

And Tony builds on these thoughts by referencing a three-part model, The post

1. "*Fosters connections* between members (catalyst for relationship building);
2. Allows members to experience "*giving back*" or contributing to the collective body (something larger than self); and
3. Personally *develops* the members (increases *effectiveness*).

These three things could be looked at from the perspective of the person posting as well as those that read and, perhaps, join the conversation."

Because we work in different domains, disciplines, fields, countries, cultures and so on, **context** is critical. Barb spoke about the importance of context in several settings, including posts that describe details of what someone did and how it worked out, and also the context around reviews of resources such as Amazon-listed books.

Because participants in the new community had asked me about meaningful and valuable posts, I maintained both terms. Jenny was the first to speak about **meaningful vs. valuable**. Her initial thoughts also emphasized the multiple layers of meaning with which we work:

"For me, the post has to resonate with my own experience in some way. It has to make a connection, either to my understanding and experience of the subject or in a social capacity. This initial connection makes the post meaningful and makes me read on.

Deciding whether a post is valuable or not is slightly different. I have to relate the post to my own context, experience and needs and determine whether the post will have an effect on any of these."

**Striving to create value:** As practitioners in online worlds, some individuals turned the question around to describe their efforts with clients and colleagues.

When I work with clients who have a specific purpose in launching an online dialogue and I analyze the posts, I find so much offered by stakeholders or constituents that is broader than the initial purpose. It would be the difference between reading a good novel to find the answer to a question and reading the book without any preconceived goal. (Brenda)

As a tutor online I try to connect with my student. To do this I try to find out as much as I can about them so that I can connect with them on a personal level

and post something that resonates with their experience and is meaningful. I think this initial relationship building can help successive posts to become more meaningful and hopefully valuable. Whether or not my posts are valuable is more complicated. It depends on my level of experience, knowledge, understanding and expertise compared to theirs and whether or not what I have to say fits their current context of what they need. (Jenny)

My question implicitly focused on **interactions**. I was asking about contributions by some individuals and meaning—making or value-finding by those persons and others. I asked about—and asked in—social technologies such as twitter and a communities of practice platform. So it is not surprising that the topic of interaction was raised explicitly. Tony moved up to another meta-level by citing practices that can **enable enhanced interaction**—and deepened meaning—by the people who are posting:

1. Invite a member to *build on his comment*. The facilitator can build upon or challenge specific thinking, taking the conversation to a deeper level...
2. Invite *other members to build upon a comment*. The facilitator can post a comment in the discussion asking other members to react to something specific that someone posted. In the process, the facilitator is shaping the conversation and modeling for others the way that one participant might engage another to facilitate learning.
3. Uncover the *reasoning behind comments*. In Chapter Four we explained how it is often not the specific position a person takes, but the reasoning that supports his position that helps thinking move forward. The topic lead can solicit this reasoning when it is absent. (Dixon, Allen, Burgess, Kilner, & Schweitzer, 2005, p. 146)

All of these techniques could enhance context, mentioned earlier as an important element of valuable posts.

*(add material from Pete Kilner's dissertation as recommended by John.)*

Finally, as Joitske knew I was gathering these thoughts for a new community, she called our attention to the online equivalent of the **power of first speakers** by writing that the “first patterns of that are established interaction [in a young community] are very important.”

I think the ideas here warrant some work and sharing. Contributors: let me know if this interests you.

## References:

- Dixon, N. M., Allen, N., Burgess, T., Kilner, P. G., & Schweitzer, S. (2005). *CompanyCommand: Unleashing the power of the army profession*. West Point: The Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning.