# What happens to community?

Whether it is a matter of organising online induction activities for first year students or energising a small-scale study group of third-years who have worked together previously, building community is more important than ever. It goes without saying that there are specific **challenges** when it comes to building online learning communities; what comes naturally in a face-to-face interaction has to be plotted far more intentionally online.

Add to this a raft of factors beyond our control: unequal access to technology and the internet; mental and physical illness (which may have been caused or exacerbated by the global pandemic); unsuitable or unsafe home environments; and competing care and/or work responsibilities. These factors can make it difficult for students - and tutors - to participate in online learning communities.

However, the current disruption also brings **opportunities** for re-thinking community-building. Moving online can allow for flexibility; this, in turn, may help to widen participation, as students can engage in asynchronous learning activities on their own time and arrange them around competing responsibilities. A move to blended learning also presents opportunities for inclusivity, allowing students for whom travel poses a challenge to access learning communities more freely without needing to travel to physical classroom spaces. Moreover, the ability to engage in online discussion without the pressure of speaking in front of a 'live' audience can empower quieter or socially anxious students to join in with shared learning experiences more fully.
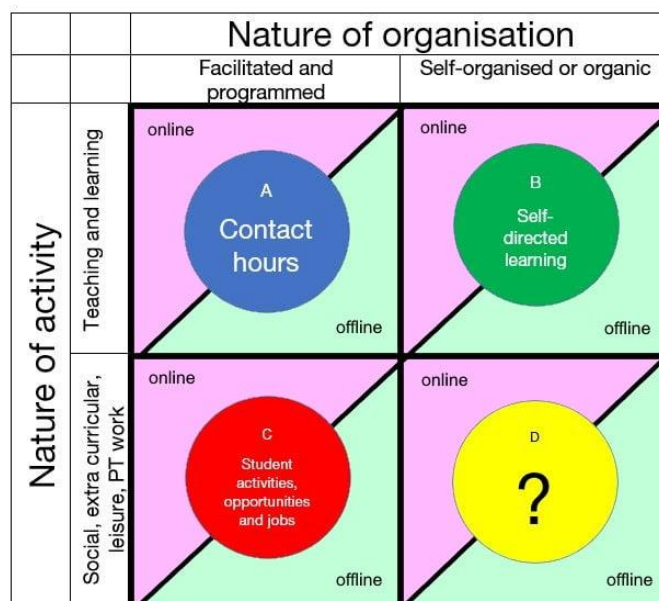
Image: this chart by Jim Dickinson calls attention to the importance of structured and unstructured social engagement - both are crucial to student wellbeing. (Source: Jim Dickinson, What exactly are students going to do with their time?)

Things to think about:

- **Embed ongoing community-building activities** at module and programme level to aid new and returning students in developing a [sense of belonging](#), [reduce feelings of isolation](#), and [enhance student retention](#).

- **Asynchronous activities** offer greater flexibility than synchronous ones, making it easier for all students to participate in the learning community. A recent talk by Sophie Nicholls (Teeside), [Creating Compassionate Learning Communities Online](#), explains why asynchronous engagements are so important to inclusive learning communities and offers practical strategies, with links to a range of additional resources.

Things to watch out for:

- **Build trust.** This is critical to any learning community, but doing so online poses specific challenges. Establish 'ground rules' for inclusive communication early on at module and programme level, so students learn how to practice respectful and productive classroom communication when working remotely. It helps to include students in the process of establishing these rules. Tammy Matthews's [5 Discussion Ground Rules for the Online Classroom](#) and this post on [Establishing Ground Rules](#) from Cornell's Center for Teaching Innovation offer tips on how to create a consensus around 'ground rules'.

- **Be generous with opportunities to connect, but sparing in unnecessary demands.** Some students will be facing difficult circumstances that may or may not be related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Including community-building activities throughout a programme or module can help to foster a sense of belonging, but try not to create pressure for students to engage in too much activity that is synchronous when it could just as easily be asynchronous - this can add to already existing stresses. Anthea Papadopoulou's [How to Build an Online Learning Community (2020)](#) offers useful suggestions.

- **Access.** Remember, students may be wrestling with complicated personal situations and limited internet access – see the Access section of this Handbook for suggestions.

Further Reading:

1. [Building an online community](#) from the University of Sheffield's Elevate team offers clear-eyed thinking on how to anticipate problems by thinking ahead, and practical solutions to address them. It includes a useful section on peer-led activities, which are crucial for empowering students in the learning process and are often overlooked in the transition to digital learning.

2. [Humanizing Online Teaching](#), a paper by Mary Raygoza, Raina León and Aaminah Norris (all from Saint Mary's College of California) provides really helpful guidelines based around the notion of 'Beloved Community'. What makes this paper so useful is its range and comprehensiveness, with attention to a wide variety of pedagogical practices.

3. Read Aimée Merrydew's [Building Online Learning Communities](#) post on the History UK blog for a list of suggested community-building strategies.