These days, people know what it means to be part of a virtual community. Whether it’s the blogs you read every day, or that person on Twitter who said just the right thing when you were tweeting about a hard day, or the discussion group that came up with the most amazing collection of ideas about the topic you introduced.

Back in 1992 when the Math Forum started, everyone was just beginning to think about what virtual community might look like. Ethnographers and education researchers took a look at the Math Forum to help them think about the benefits of virtual communities for teachers and learners. Here are some things they noticed:

- In online communities, peoples’ roles can evolve as they learn and explore and try on new identities
- The community’s values can support learning and growth: values like responsiveness, teamwork, and resourcefulness
- Online communities have multiple entry points: you can lurk, contribute a little, or change the game completely

The three profiles below tell three stories of Math Forum community members whose roles have grown and changed, whether they were with us in the days of newsgroups, or found the Math Forum recently.

Craig first read about the Math Forum on an email listserv for Mathematics, Science, and Technology Education. He heard that teachers who were using online tools were getting together to catalog technology tools used in math education (the MathTools project). He went in to the Tool Fest gathering thinking he would mostly be learning from the experts there, but ended up really valuing the teacher-to-teacher conversations. *The teachers in his building were only beginning to access and use new technologies, so he was able to be part of conversations he couldn’t have at home.*

*The supportive environment helped him feel like he could contribute to other math teachers’ online experiences.* Craig has participated in professional development courses been involved in many online discussions, worked on various professional development courses and moderated a few sessions of one of them, submitted lessons to the Teacher Exchange, submitted several tools to the MathTools site, and evaluated several other tools. He’s also made presentations at state math conferences based on experiences with, or lessons learned via, the Math Forum.

Here are Craig’s own words: “My experience with Tool Fest was profound. *It radically changed my approach to professional development; it made me feel more a part of a community of math educators (rather than just a spectator to the community).* “ Craig helped get others involved in these conversations, *bringing his colleagues together to take an online professional development course,* noting “the types of discussion we enjoyed during that course have become much more common, and are professionally rewarding.”

Peggy describes her evolution in the Math Forum conversation this way: “*I began as a teacher looking for interesting and challenging problems and registered at the Math Forum as an individual.* Then I liked the idea that others would give students feedback [on their problem solving], so took advantage of a trial membership. Finally I registered a class [giving my students online access to the Problems of the Week]. Having participated in summer professional development and online courses I as a teacher grew in respecting this online community that seeks to provide problems to challenge students, support for teachers and requires writing to communicate and share ideas when reaching a solution.”
Not only does Peggy help support other teachers in their quests to become better educators by participating in and moderating online courses and workshops, her students are putting their problem-solving out there for other students and teachers to learn from!

This year, six of Peggy’s students volunteered to be mentored by participants in Drexel’s Master’s of Mathematics Teaching and Learning, committing to submitting or revising a problem a week for eight weeks. In addition, almost all of Peggy’s students eagerly submit their solutions to problems that are being mentored by our volunteer pre-service teachers. The students like hearing their thinking valued by other community members, and the pre-service teachers learn a lot from exchanges with real students. **Peggy’s students revise their work and write back to their mentors, so the mentors learn what kind of feedback was most effective.**

Peggy’s students are especially proud when their work is shared with all of the students and teachers that use the Problems of the Week. They work hard to write clear, complete solutions that are highlighted on the Math Forum website. “This sends a boost of pride and excitement into the student and the class. Someone outside of the classroom choose to comment on their work. Even some of their wonderings were quoted. **Michael H wondered if the temperature in a hot tub would really get 8000 degrees hotter if burning for 1000 hours. I assure you Michael knows what would happen to the water if it burned for 1000 hrs. But his musings lead to a discussion on domain and range for the practical application.”**

**Patty joined the Math Forum conversation through an online workshop, “Using Technology and Problem Solving to Build Algebraic Reasoning.” She enjoyed the conversation and helped others connect to what they were learning. When she was invited to apply to create more community-facilitated workshops, and become a facilitator of subsequent workshops, she jumped at the chance.**

Most recently, Patty has gotten involved in the Math Forum’s new Financial Education area. After attending the Financial Education Summer Institute, **Patty went back to her own district and began planning a financial education course to offer her students next year.** She describes drafting a “project-based math applications course where financial literacy and financial applications are a main focus. I have every intention of utilizing the information, resources and friends I made at the Financial Institute and of course, The Math Forum, to help create a real hands-on, rich, and hopefully collaborative course. (I also know my participation in the Summer Institute was valuable in getting the interest/support of my administrators). I am hoping to write into the curriculum, with permission, some of the financial PoW’s, perhaps create or help create some [PoWs]? ….I’d even like to have my students visit Val’s blog and some of the articles she’s referenced.”

Patty and her students value the resources they have accessed at the Math Forum, and love being part of the community by helping to create those resources. **We’re looking forward to sharing the Financial Education Problems of the Week they create,** and participating in the conversations on Val’s Financial Education in the Math Classroom blog.

**How can I get involved?**

One great way to get involved is through free and low-cost online Orientation Sessions and Community-Facilitated Workshops.

Visit: http://mathforum.org/pd/ to find out more about Orientation Sessions and Workshops

Or you can read and discuss the brand-new Math Forum blogs.

http://mathforum.org/blogs/

Valerie blogs about Financial Education in the Math Classroom

Max writes about being a math coach, explores the big math ideas in different activities or topics, and has a growing collection of videos of math learning and teaching.

Suzanne writes from time to time about her philosophy of math education, and how those philosophies play out in the day-to-day experience of a classroom teacher.

Following us on Twitter connects you with an ever-expanding network of Math Education tweeters who can talk about everything from classroom activities to education policy to division of fractions in 140 characters or less.

Visit http://mathforum.org/pd/twitter/ to find our “handles”