The Role and Responsibility of the Learner in the Online Classroom

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Becoming Learner Focused

When online learning was in its infancy, the focus in the field was to orient faculty to the use of technology and how to develop an online course. With the realization, however, that students in an online course will not simply know how to engage with the instructor, the material, or one another, a focus on the student is emerging. Online learning, in its best form, is learner-centered and learner-focused. But what does that really mean when it comes to working with the online learner? A learner focused, self-directed approach is based on a core belief that we cannot “teach” but can only facilitate the acquisition of knowledge. Additionally, learner focused online teaching depends on the formation of an online learning community amongst the learners to act as the vehicle through which content and knowledge generation is conveyed. Although we believe that it is the instructor’s responsibility to set the tone and begin the development of the learning community, the ball must then be thrown to the learners.

The creation of the learning community can begin with a set of participation expectations to which students can respond and with latitude for negotiation. However, once the basis for participation is established, the students must take the reigns with gentle nudging from the instructor to do so, working with one another to negotiate the ways in which they will interact on an ongoing basis.

In our previous work on the development of online learning communities, we discussed the role of the learner in the online learning process. We noted that the functions that the learner undertakes are in the areas of knowledge generation, collaboration, and process management (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). We did not, however, specifically look at the role the learner plays in the formation of the learning community. We will now look more specifically at the characteristics needed on the part of the learner in order to promote the development of the online learning community in and online class.

Necessary Learner Characteristics

In order to promote the development of the online learning community, the learner must be open, flexible, honest, willing to take on the responsibility for community formation, and willing to work collaboratively with others. Let us examine each of these individually:

Openness

In our most recent book, The Virtual Student (Palloff & Pratt, 2003), we discuss some of the important characteristic the student needs to possess in order to be successful in an online course. One of these is a willingness to be open about personal details of his or her life, work, and other educational experiences. Sharing this information can be encouraged by the instructor early on through the posting of introductions and bios. As the course progresses, students can encourage one another to continue to share information and experiences through participation in the social area of the course or by responding in a personal way to the posts of others.
Flexibility and Humor

Going with the flow of an online course, not being rattled when things go wrong, and even facing the minor crises with humor help to keep the sense of community moving. Often, students will encounter technical difficulties that may preclude their involvement online or may encounter life experiences that interfere. Being able to jump back in when the barriers are removed and rejoin the learning process and the learning community are important. Additionally, the virtual student needs to accept the changed role of the instructor online and recognize that the deepest learning in an online course comes from interaction with everyone involved. Developing that level of understanding and being willing to take on the responsibility involved with the creation of the learning community as a result is critical to its formation.

The ability to see humor in text and to laugh at ourselves online is another measure of flexibility. The creation of a warm, inviting course environment includes the use of humor. The issue online is that humorous comments may be misinterpreted due to the absence of visual cues. Consequently, care in the wording of a humorous comment, the use of emoticons (or text symbols that convey emotion, examples of which can be found in the Toolkit), or bracketing the emotion involved, such as [just teasing here] can help recipients of the message understand the intent. Humor should not be overused so as to trivialize the course. However, judiciously and respectfully used, humor can assist in the formation of a learning community.

Honesty

The ability to be honest in an online course needs to be modeled first by the instructor, and then others will feel comfortable in following suit. In so doing, the instructor creates an atmosphere of safety in which learners feel that it is acceptable to express how they feel in a respectful way. Sometimes this may mean expressing an unpopular opinion, or confronting a team member for lack of participation. When students become equally concerned about the development of a learning community and are willing to jump into the fray in a professional way, their honesty is seen as something in service of community development.

Willingness to Take the Responsibility for Community Formation

The previous discussion of honesty is closely related to a willingness to take the responsibility for community formation. Students need to get the message that this is seen as important by the instructor and a critical component of course completion. By paying close attention to community development early in the course, the instructor models the skills and abilities required for developing community. Students will then pick up on that and continue the work. Simply interacting with one another is not enough. Students will begin to question levels of engagement when it is felt that commitment to the formation of the learning community is lacking. When the instructor sets the stage appropriately, the virtual student begins to understand that his or her individual learning process is dependent on the participation and commitment of the other students in the group.

Willingness to Work Collaboratively

Collaboration is one of the key features of the learning community. Participation in the online course is not the same as collaboration. Collaboration goes beyond direct engagement in specific activities and is consistent throughout the course (Mayes, 2001). Collaboration is a process that assists students in achieving deeper levels of knowledge generation through the creation of shared goals, shared exploration, and a shared process of meaning-making (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). By asking students at the beginning of a course to share their learning goals for the course, the instructor creates an atmosphere where
collaboration can flourish. Asking students to discuss their concerns around collaboration and to negotiate the way in which they will work together sets the stage for the collaboration that will occur throughout the course. Working through differences of opinion regarding how a course should progress and defining each student’s needs in that regard can be uncomfortable, but does open the door to collaboration. Collaboration is sustained throughout the course by encouraging dialogue, the critique of assignments, and collaborative work. But it is the spirit of collaboration, and not the tasks of collaboration which sustains the learning community. Students must embrace that spirit in order for collaboration to flourish.

Maximizing Participation to Enhance Community

Simple participation is not enough to create and sustain an online learning community. Certainly, the creation of minimum participation guidelines assists in getting and keeping students online. However, just checking in on a regular basis and not contributing something substantive to the discussion does little to support the development of the learning community. Some believe that the addition of synchronous “chat” sessions can promote a sense of community. However, in our experience, the coordination and connectivity problems often encountered in synchronous communication often interferes with achieving community-building goals. We have found that promoting active asynchronous discussion is the best means to support interactivity in the online course. Once students establish a rhythm and begin to actively interact with one another online, they will take the responsibility to sustain it ongoing, either through social interaction or response to discussion questions posted by the instructor. Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, (2000) believe that the learners will, “...internalize [the instructor’s] internal monologue as commentator, clarifier, and questioner of thoughts” (p.204). It is important, then, that the questions posted regarding course material are created with an eye toward developing and maintaining a high degree of interaction.

Empowering Learners to Take Charge

The following are suggestions for instructors that we feel enhance interactivity and participation (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 2001):

• Be clear about how much time the course will require of both students and faculty in order to eliminate potential misunderstandings about course demands.
• Teach students about online learning. We will return to a more complete discussion of orientation for online learning. However, suffice it to say that students simply do not know how to learn in an online environment, nor do they simply know how to build community. These are two of the important elements that should be included in a good orientation to online learning.
• As the instructor, be a model of good participation by logging on often and contributing to the discussion and the formation of community. Students will walk through the door to community formation if the instructor shows them where it is and, perhaps, opens it for them.
• Be willing to step in and set limits if participation wanes or if the conversation is headed in the wrong direction. Additionally, the instructor needs to set limits with those who dominate the discussion, as that can quash the participation of others.
• Remember that there are people attached to the words on the screen. Be willing to contact students who are not participating and invite them in or back in, as the case may be.

Finally, instructors need to be willing to give up control and allow learners to take charge of the learning process. Additionally, we as instructors need to involve learners in co-creating learning opportunities, thus increasing their motivation to learn and to be involved. In so doing, we allow learners to take ownership for the process and for their own learning community. The result is not only successful
achievement of learning objectives for the class, but the creation of empowered learners who will move on to other learning experiences with a greater sense of responsibility and accomplishment.

References


Biographical Sketches

Rena Palloff, Ph.D. and Keith Pratt, Ph.D. are both Core Faculty in the School of Education at Capella University, adjunct faculty at the Fielding Graduate Institute, and the managing partners of Crossroads Consulting Group. They are the authors of the 1999 Frandson Award winning book Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom (Jossey-Bass, 1999) and Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom (Jossey-Bass, 2001). Written for faculty, trainers, faculty developers, and administrators of distance learning programs, the books are comprehensive guides to the development of an online environment that helps promote successful learning outcomes while building and fostering a sense of community among the learners. The book is based on their many years of teaching experience in the online environment and contains vignettes and case examples from a variety of successful online courses. Drs. Palloff and Pratt have been presenting this work across the United States and internationally since 1994 at conferences including the Distance Teaching and Learning Conference in Madison, WI, EDUCAUSE, and the League for Innovation, as well as consulting to academic institutions regarding the development of effective distance learning programs. Their forthcoming book, The Virtual Student, was released in March 2003.

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