Online Learning Communities Revisited

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Wenger (1999) notes that issues of education should be addressed first and foremost in terms of identities and modes of belonging, two elements that are critical factors in the creation of community, whether it be face-to-face or online. In other words, it is the social aspects of education that are the most important. Wenger feels that after these important issues are addressed in an educational setting, the instructor can then turn to the transfer of skills and information. The value of education, according to Wenger, is in social participation and the active involvement in community. Social identity drives learning. Research shows that communities today, whether face-to-face or online, are formed around issues of identity and shared values (Palloff, 1996). It is through the creation of a sense of shared values and shared identity that we feel a sense of belonging – a sense of community. We have been discussing these issues in relationship to the development of online learning communities for several years (Palloff and Pratt, 1999), continuing to believe that community is the vehicle through which online courses are most effectively delivered regardless of content. Our thinking about community, however, continues to evolve as we teach online courses and follow the growing body of research on this important topic. Given that as a backdrop, we will now review our evolution in working with the concept of community and how that evolution is supporting the development of effective online courses.

The Ongoing Debate: Can Community be Formed Online?

One of the issues that fuels the debate about whether online learning communities truly exist is in the way we define them, or do not define them as the case may be. Shapiro and Hughes (2002) note that “there is no value-neutral or purely administrative or technical way of building culture and community (p.94)” and believe that this is the weakness of the literature regarding online community that already exists. How, then, are we defining community in the context of an online class? Has our definition of online learning communities changed since we wrote Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace (1999)? Is there a value-neutral way to contextualize community when discussing online learning?

Descriptions of online community have moved a distance from Howard Rheingold’s (1993) definition of online community which states, “...virtual communities are cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace (p. 57),” to a place of knowing that certain features must be present in order to help the people who are seeing one another frequently in cyberspace coalesce into a community. Our belief in the ability to form online community and our own definition of online community and how it plays out in an online course has not varied significantly since we first presented it, although our concepts of what constitutes community have expanded. We believe that there are two components, however, that distinguish the online learning community from an online community, such as a listserv or online group, where people meet due to a common interest. Engaging in collaborative learning and the reflective practice involved in transformative learning differentiate the online learning community.
Community and Social Presence

Recent studies of the online learning environment have noted that involvement or “social presence,” better known as a feeling of community and connection among learners, has contributed positively to learning outcomes and learner satisfaction with online courses. Tu and Corry (2002) identified three dimensions of social presence: Social context, online communication, and interaction. Picciano (2002) found a consistently strong relationship among learner perceptions of interaction, social presence, and learning. Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) linked social presence to student satisfaction with online courses. Kazmer (2000) noted that building a learning community is necessary for a sense of social presence and, ultimately, for successful learner-to-learner interaction. In an earlier study, Murphy, Drabier, and Epps (1998) noted that the use of asynchronous online collaboration increased learner interaction, satisfaction, and learning.

Beyond learner satisfaction, however, is the more important belief that collaboration enhances learning outcomes and reduces the potential for learner isolation that can occur in the online environment. By learning together in a learning community, students have the opportunity to extend and deepen their learning experience, test out new ideas by sharing them with a supportive group, and receive critical and constructive feedback. The likelihood of successful achievement of learning objectives and achieving course competencies increases through collaborative engagement. Conrad and Donaldson (2004) state, “[The] collaborative acquisition of knowledge is one key to the success of creating an online learning environment. Activities that require student interaction and encourage a sharing of ideas promote a deeper level of thought” (p.5). The following is our evolved model of online community that relies on a cycle of collaboration and community-building and is constructed around the notions of social presence, constructivism, and the use of an online learning community to achieve successful outcomes in an online course:

The advancing study of online community informs us that community is made up of more than what we originally thought. The elements of community, as we previously identified them (Palloff & Pratt, 1999 and 2003) included:
- People – the students, faculty, and staff involved in an online course
- Shared Purpose – coming together to take an online course, including the sharing of information, interests, and resources
- Guidelines – create the structure for the online course, by providing the ground rules for interaction and participation
- Technology – serves as a vehicle for delivery of the course and a place where everyone involved can meet
- Collaborative learning – promotes student-to-student interaction as the primary mode of learning and also supports socially constructed meaning and knowledge creation
- Reflective practice – promotes transformative learning

We now note that social presence is a critical element of the online community and one that is critical to collaborative work.

Creating and Sustaining Community

Simple participation in an online course 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 students enjoy the addition of synchronous discussion, or chats, as a means of building community. When used judiciously, chat can be a good adjunct to the course. Often, what occurs in a chat session, is that students will wander into social discourse in addition to discussing the topic at hand. This can serve to foster community as people get to know one another in real time.

Synchronous discussion should not be the only means by which students engage with one another, however. Promoting active asynchronous discussion is the best means to support interactivity and the development of community 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, et al. (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 and the building of community.

Final Thoughts

This brief discussion has served to illustrate that community along with the student’s roles and responsibilities within it are critical to the outcome of the online learning process. Despite some of the criticism leveled toward the formation of a learning community in an online course, we remain committed to its importance in promoting the outcomes we seek and feel that the development of learning communities online distinguishes this form of learning from a simple correspondence course delivered via electronic means.

References


**Biographical Sketches**

**Rena Palloff** and **Keith Pratt** are the authors of the 1999 Frandson Award winning book *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), *The Virtual Student* (Jossey-Bass, 2003), and *Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community* (Jossey-Bass, 2005). The books are comprehensive guides to the development of an online environment that helps promote successful learning outcomes while fostering collaboration and building a sense of community among the learners. Drs. Palloff and Pratt have been presenting this work across the United States and internationally since 1994 as well as consulting to academic institutions regarding the development of effective distance learning programs. They have presented at the Distance Learning Conference annually since 1999. In addition to their consulting work, Dr. Palloff is faculty at the Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, CA and Dr. Pratt is Associate Dean of Distance Learning and Instructional Technology at Northwest Arkansas Community College in Bentonville, AR.

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