Building Virtual Communities: Techniques That Work!

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Introduction

Research continues to show that the construction of a learning community, with the instructor participating as an equal member, is the key to successful online course outcomes and is the vehicle through which online education is best delivered. How to develop effective learning communities, however, remains a mystery to some. This paper will explore specific concepts and techniques that can be used in any online class to successfully develop a learning community approach.

The Focus on Community

The online learning community continues to generate much interest, both in terms of research and in faculty training in terms of how to successfully create a learning community. Faculty, however, continue to raise significant questions about the importance of a community-based approach to online learning, its impact, and how to develop and sustain it. Much of the writing on the topic describes the use of threaded discussions in response to instructor discussion questions as the main means by which community is developed. However, our own research, as well as that of others, has shown that intentional work on the development of presence online as well as other means by which community can emerge are important and significantly impact both student learning and satisfaction with online courses. As a result of these explorations, the following questions emerge:

- How is community best developed online?
- How important is community in the online course?
- What is the role of presence?
- How do we know when the student is engaged with the subject matter and not just socializing?
- How are disagreement and conflict best addressed and how does that help or hinder community development?
- What techniques beyond threaded discussion can be used to develop and sustain community?

We will now address each of these questions in an attempt to create a set of best practices for the development and maintenance of online learning communities.

Community Development and Its Importance Online

We have found that even experienced faculty have something to learn about the creation of a learning community online. An instructor who was participating in one of our trainings asked why he could not get students to talk to him or include him in their conversations. Instead of seeing this as a good thing and evidence of a developing learning community that was able to carry on without the input of an instructor, he felt excluded and anxious. It is not easy to let go of traditional values and ideas in the
academic arena. When instructors are given the opportunity to discuss their concerns and even fears emerging from their online experiences, it frees them to try new and better techniques to enhance learning, including the development of learning communities.

We have further found that online training courses are a useful way to deliver training to faculty who will be teaching online. In an online training course, faculty can experience first-hand what it is like to be both an instructor and a student in the process. Participating in their own learning community helps them to understand the creation of a learning community in their own courses – they experience first-hand the value of this approach and are eager to implement it.

Students will not automatically gravitate to a learning community approach, however. Fink (2003) describes the necessity to teach learners how to learn. He describes three aspects to this task – teaching students to become better learners, teaching students how to inquire and construct knowledge, and teaching students to become self-directed. The outcome of this endeavor, according to Fink, is that students are enabled to continue to learn and to do so with greater effectiveness. Derrick (2003) concurs and states, “Once learners are able to understand their own capacities for learning – any learning – they are fundamentally changed with regard to their personal view of their capabilities and competence. The learning reinforces beliefs and efficacious behaviors for lifelong and sustained learning” (p.16).

The ability to develop and sustain a learning community, then, becomes an important competency for online instructors. One of the participants in our certification program for online instructors, entitled Teaching in the Virtual Classroom, provided the following list of competencies for online instructors after reviewing much of the literature in this area. They are:

- Create a learning community that is intellectually exciting and challenging
- Encourage learners to perform to the best of their abilities in all aspects
- Consistently use process-oriented instructional methods and keep the learning community centered
- Demonstrate effective use of group dynamics and dialogue techniques
- Use a variety of learning activities and demonstrate instructional methods other than lecturing
- Stress the interrelatedness of the complete curriculum and the value
- Know workplace trends and perspectives related to the subject matter being taught
- Establish objectives and impart learners to achieve them
- Draw out creativity, innovativeness, and ideas in a collaborative manner
- Integrate curriculum designed to provide learners with a learning environment that is experientially based and in a learning style that is collaborative and supportive
- Evaluate learning outcomes
- Attend professional development workshops that will review learning theories and continually develop facilitator skills (Davidson, 2006)

The Role of Presence

Several authors who have written about the online learning community and online learning have noted the roles and functions that emerge for both the instructor and the learners in the online class. In our books, we discussed the concept of social presence and its importance in the development of a learning community (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2003, 2005, 2007). We also mentioned that negotiation of roles is a part of the establishment of the learning community. Clearly, in order for the people within the community to act on the roles needed to make it function, there must be a sense of who everyone is as real people.
Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), in their model of online communities of inquiry, asserted that two additional forms of presence—cognitive presence, and teaching presence—can be found in online communities of inquiry, online classroom communities being one form, and are also necessary elements for teaching and learning. They believe that the three forms of presence overlap to create the educational experience. They described cognitive presence as the element most often associated with success in education and can be defined as “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication…[it] is a vital element in critical thinking, a process and outcome that is frequently presented as the ostensible goal of all higher education” (p. 4). They noted that teaching presence is generally the role and function of the instructor, although this role may be shared among the participants. Teaching presence is further divided into two major functions—first, the selection, organization, and design of content, activities, and assessment and second, the facilitation of the course. We believe that to develop an effective online learning community, all of these functions need to be shared with the learners—they need to be empowered to take on the responsibility for their own learning as well as that of their student colleagues.

The goal of instruction online should be to provide for all forms of presence. Our belief is that social presence comes first—the ability to connect as people forms the foundation of the learning community. The other forms of presence then emerge from that and are wholly dependent on it. Developing a learning community then relies on first, establishing a means by which that connection between people can occur and then developing learning activities that can sustain it.

**Engagement Online**

Our view of the online learning community takes into account the people involved (social presence) and the social function, the policies and processes involved (which we call purpose and which overlaps with teaching presence), and the process, which includes the interaction and communication that support cognitive presence. We include the need to pay attention to the technology in the process area for without it, no communication can take place online. If these elements are accounted for in an online class, the result is engagement—engagement of students to content, students with one another, and students with the instructor. To determine if, in fact, community has formed and has become an integral part of the course, the following outcomes should be present:

- Active interaction involving both course content and personal communication
- Collaborative learning evidenced by comments directed primarily student to student rather than student to instructor
- Socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning, with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning
- Sharing of resources among students
- Expressions of support and encouragement exchanged between students, as well as willingness to critically evaluate the work of others (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2007)

When these elements are observable, an instructor can be reasonably assured that students are engaging with the course and not simply socializing or chatting. Critical thinking is evident and learning is occurring.

**Dealing with Disagreement and Conflict**

A study conducted by Johnson, et al. (1998) noted that conflict in classes where collaborative activity is present does not seem to stem from the completion of the tasks or assignments in the class. Instead, it
seems to stem from an unwillingness to participate, poor group planning of activities or assignment completion, and disagreements between group members. In other words, it is the social aspects of group study that breeds conflict and appears to need attention up front as the guidelines for the class are developed so as to minimize this potentially detrimental effect. Conflict, then, is not necessarily negative, and is necessary in order to achieve group cohesiveness and intimacy.

One of the concerns about conflict online is that with the absence of face-to-face contact and cues, many people feel less socially constrained. In a face-to-face situation, people tend to choose a number of options for dealing with conflict. They may avoid it or confront the situation directly. Although this may be done in anger, it is best done within the confines of what we would consider to be socially appropriate behavior. We see the same conflict choices being made online, but because the conflict is being handled through the transmission of written messages, with the possibility of timing and sequencing becoming a problem, resolution of conflict online takes patience and work. In an online classroom, another member of the group may step in as a mediator to facilitate this process. This, too, is an indicator that a solid community foundation is in place. Establishing guidelines up front that address the appropriate handling of conflict can head off problems and is critical to community development. Promoting a norm of professional communication—in other words, communication that deals with issues but is not personal—should be foundational to the early development of the learning community.

Techniques for Developing and Sustaining Community

Based on this review as well as our own experience with developing and sustaining online learning communities, the following techniques are those we recommend:

- **Begin the course by focusing on the development of social presence.** This can be achieved through the posting of bios and introductions and enhanced through the use of ice-breaker activities that are fun and designed to help students get to know one another. Use the first week of the course for these activities and delay real engagement with content. The content can be used as a basis for ice breakers, however.

- **Establish guidelines for engagement.** This can be achieved by posting a set of guidelines developed by the instructor and asking for a response to them by students or students can be given a set of parameters within which they can develop their own guidelines, thus creating a “group charter” by which their engagement is guided.

- **Establish minimal participation guidelines.** The minimum participation expected should be included in the guidelines with an understanding that more is better. The instructor should model good participation through regular presence in the course.

- **Allow students to disagree.** Professional disagreement on issues is healthy and should be encouraged. Hopefully, as the community develops, students will jump in and mediate if things get heated. If not, it is the instructor’s responsibility to settle things down if they begin to become personal.

- **Develop a course that is exciting, challenging, and incorporates collaborative activity and opportunities for reflection.** Collaboration both helps to develop the online learning community, but also sustains it. Giving students opportunities to work together in smaller subsets of the whole helps to develop creativity and critical thinking skills. Incorporating reflective activity into these activities and the course only serves to deepen this impact.
Final Thoughts

It is our strong belief that the online learning community is the vehicle through which learning occurs in the online course, regardless of subject matter. To achieve best practices in the development of online learning communities:

- The balance of power needs to change
- The function of the content needs to change
- The role of the instructor needs to change
- The responsibility for learning needs to change
- The purpose and process of student assessment needs to change

Research is indicating that when these types of instructional practices and the development of a learning community is the focus in an online class, student participation and satisfaction increase. As Derrick (2003) noted, their competence as learners increases through this approach and lifelong learning is the result. We believe that attention to the development of a learning community at the start of an online course is time well spent.

References


Presenters

Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt are the managing partners of Crossroads Consulting Group. Rena and Keith are program directors and faculty in the Teaching in the Virtual Classroom program at Fielding Graduate University. Rena also teaches at Capella University and Northcentral University. Keith is a mentor of faculty development at Northcentral University. 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), Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom (Jossey-Bass, 2001), The Virtual Student (Jossey-Bass, 2003), Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community (Jossey-Bass, 2005), and the newly released second edition of Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace, now titled, Building Online Learning Communities published in July 2007 (Jossey-Bass). 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.

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