BUILDING COMMUNITY IN AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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What is Community?

- The successful construction of a community in the traditional sense is a social network marked by participation, trust, shared interests and values, shared responsibility, norms and rituals, and by the ability to embrace differences while forming a group identity

(Wang, Sierra & Folger, 2003).
What is an Online Learning Community?

- A community in which students view each other as partners rather than isolated individuals who happen to be working toward similar goals (Cerminara, 2004).

- Social aggregations that emerge . . . when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 2000).

- Joint learning tasks and outcomes that motivate community efforts (Thompson & MacDonald, 2005).
What is an Online Learning Community?

Although learning communities have been defined in different ways, the majority of the definitions share common elements:

- Shared goal(s)
- Membership
- Trust
- Connectedness
- Collaboration
- Community boundaries

(Shea et al., 2002).
Characteristics of an Online Learning Community

- Using ‘we’
- Agreeing (or disagreeing) with each other;
- Mentioning each other by name;
- Making social remarks;
- Arranging to share information;
- Suggesting further collaboration;
- Initiating discussions;
- Lobbying;
- Humor;
- Providing informal mentoring

(Chapman et al., 2005)
Imagine a collection of individuals, working in close proximity, sharing a common purpose and passion—a desire to learn ...

Imagine this same collection of individuals, working closely together, sharing knowledge, aspiring to the same vision ...

Imagine that same collection of individuals, sharing each other’s hopes and fears, empathizing emotionally, unleashing the power of their collective intelligences.

This is a learning community.

(Collarbone, 2001, as cited in Chapman, Ramondt & Smiley, 2005)
Why Do We Want to Build Community?

Because a learning community does not develop easily or instantly, practitioners must thoughtfully weave strategies for community building into their course designs.

(Thompson & MacDonald, 2005).
Why Do We Want to Build Community?

- Help overcome a sense of isolation that online students traditionally feel (reduced social and visual cues)
- Leads to more reflective discourse
- Leads to higher student engagement
- Greater respect for the diversity of all students
- Higher intrinsic motivation
- Increase the likelihood that students will stay involved and motivated
- Students perceive themselves to be more engaged, satisfied, and successful in their learning
- Build relationships to humanize online learning
Why Do We Want to Build Community?

- Facilitator is able to focus on the quality of learning, because online learners can assist each other with the more mundane concerns.
- Online learning which focuses on content but discounts community will have more difficulty in generating a deep learning experience for students.
- Students in face to face and hybrid classes have been found to have a greater sense of community and connectedness than those in online classes.
- A weak sense of social cohesiveness could result in increased drop-outs.
- The social capital derived from online communities—such as mutual understandings and shared values and behaviors—will benefit online learners through the availability of greater support and socioemotional well-being.

(Chapman et al., 2005; Lui et al., 2007; Thompson & MacDonald, 2005; West, 2010)
How To Build Community

- Learners must do more than just go through the motions and instead understand how they benefit by engaging in the learning collective.
- A community is formed as people become bound by the value they find in learning together.
- Four factors to consider in building community:
  - Learner-Learner
  - Facilitator
  - Class Design
  - Tools

(Thompson & MacDonald, 2005)
How To Build Community: Learner-Learner

- Netiquette
- Develop relationships (introductions, autobiographies)
  - Tendency to respond and interact more with those we know
- Develop trust – feel other learners are reliable and secure
- Share personal stories and experiences
- All learners participate in discussions and class activities
- Non-subject matter discussion areas (“watercooler”, shared resources, reflections)
- Collaboration, not just interaction (discussion, group projects, brainstorming)
- Balance task driven and socio-emotional driven interactions
How To Build Community: Learner-Learner

- Knowledge construction, not just information sharing
- Interdependence during discussions (relying on peers, not just instructor)
- Small team collaboration monitored by an instructor
- Promote negotiation and argumentation in discussions and group activities
- Peer feedback on assignments
- Use preferred learner names
- Lack of self-consciousness about how input will be regarded by others
How To Build Community:

Learner-Learner

Aragon, 2003
Humbert, 2006
Liu et al., 2007
Skinner, 2007
Thompson & MacDonald, 2005
Wang, et al., 2003
West, 2010
Woods, 2003
Yang et al., 2007
How To Build Community:

Facilitator

- Address students by name
- Allow students options for how to address facilitator
- Create a teaching presence (course design, organization, direct facilitation)
- Active discussion participation
- Establish a personal presence (photos, stories, personal examples related to content)
- Clear expectations, procedures and community rules
- Establish the building blocks of community early in the class, before more demanding intellectual tasks get under way
- The emphasis on shared goals needs to be explicit, helping students to overcome a sense of being strangers with nothing in common
How To Build Community:
Facilitator

- Encourage participation
- Give ample and frequent feedback and reward
- Answer email (and other communication) promptly
- Attend to individual concerns
- Use a friendly, personal tone
- Model community participation skills and values (turn-taking, netiquette, thoughtful responses to peer’s posts, organization and facilitation of community events, chat)
- Actively monitor discussions to answer questions, resolve conflicts, and guide discussion as needed
- Develop sense of connectedness and social presence through immediacy (email, audio or videos of instructor, welcome message, emoticons, humor, phone calls).
- Model effective communication skills
How To Build Community:
Facilitator

Aragon, 2003
Liu et al., 2007
Skinner, 2007
West, 2010
Woods, 2003
How To Build Community:

Class Design

- Give learners an outcome oriented reason to work together
- Use early class strategies (ice breakers, statement of expectation regarding participation, guidelines for effective online behaviors)
- Develop in-depth interactions (not shallow)
- Learners participate in decision making on communication rules and class protocols
- Small discussion groups or team collaboration (anywhere from 3 upward)
- Small class size (maximum 25-30)

(Aragon, 2003; Liu, et al., 2007; Thompson & MacDonald, 2005)
How To Build Community: Learning Tools

- Invest in necessary tools to participate in class
- Know how to use technology
- Reliable and glitch-free technology

(Liu, et al., 2007; West 2010)
Challenges to Building Community

- Building online learning communities requires effort (West, 2010) and time (Chapman et al., 2005)
- Requires “buy in” by students (Woods, 2003)
- Sense of community may come from the group or program level rather than from the course level (Liu et al., 2007)
- Communities cannot develop on their own without careful planning, continued support, and intentional tasks and activities (Liu et al., 2007)
- With both online instructors and learners having competing roles within their respective lives, they need to be convinced that the benefits of a learning community are worth the extra time to invest in their creation and maintenance (Liu et al., 2007)
Your Thoughts and Experiences

- Discussion of these findings?

- Ideas on how to apply these factors in your own learning settings?

- Share your own experiences with community building?
Resources


Resources


- Rovai, A. P. (2002). Building sense of community at a distance. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 3*(1).


Resources


