Creating an Online Learning Community
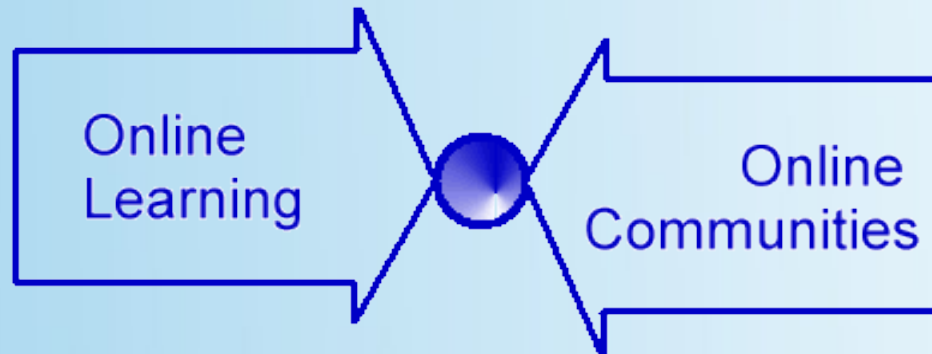
Stephen Downes, University of Alberta
Virtual School Symposium
November 25, 1999

1. What is an Online Learning Community?

2. Why Would I Want to Create One?

3. Components of Online Learning Communities
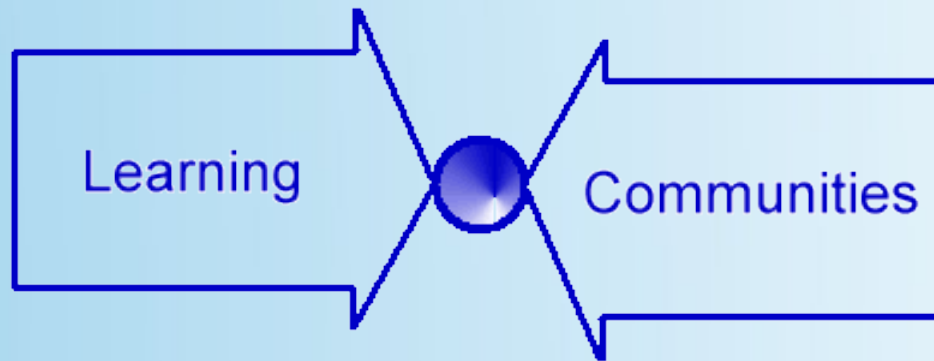
4. Nurturing an Online Learning Community

1. What is an Online Learning Community?

Technologically…

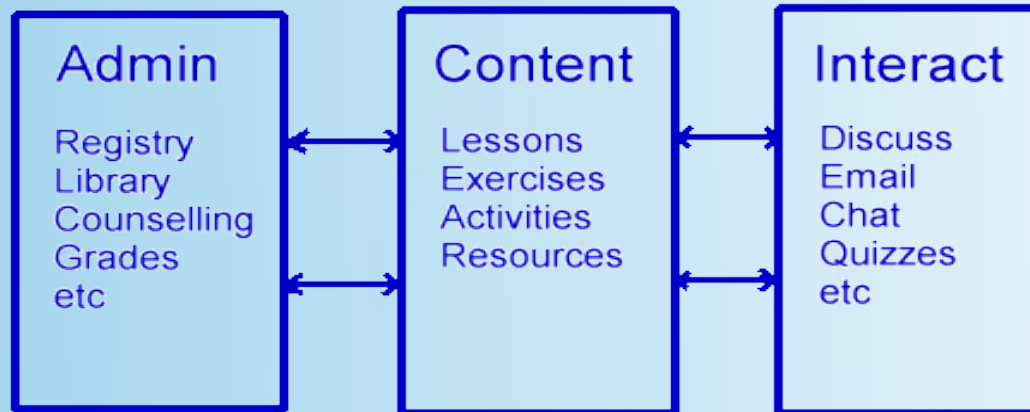… the convergence of *online learning* and *online communities…*

Conceptually…

… the convergence of *learning* and *communities…*
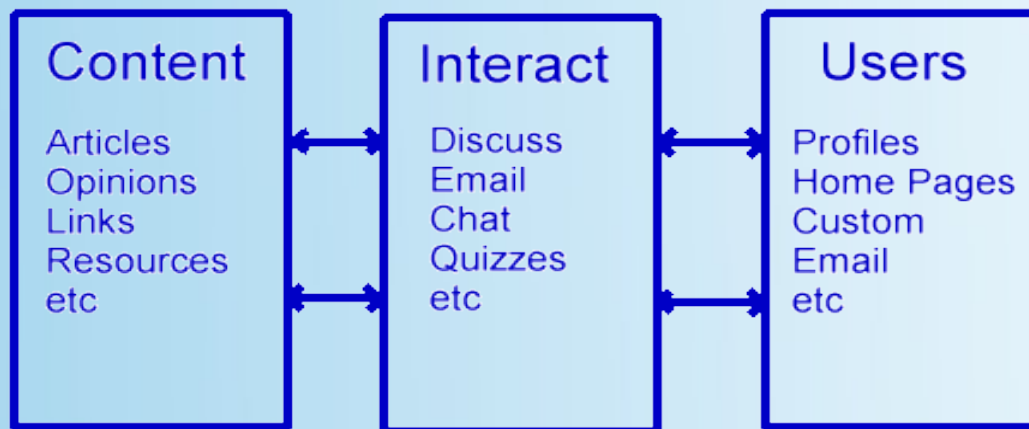
What It's Not

- It's not a "community" label slapped onto just any online course
- It's not a "learning" label slapped onto just any online community

Online Learning

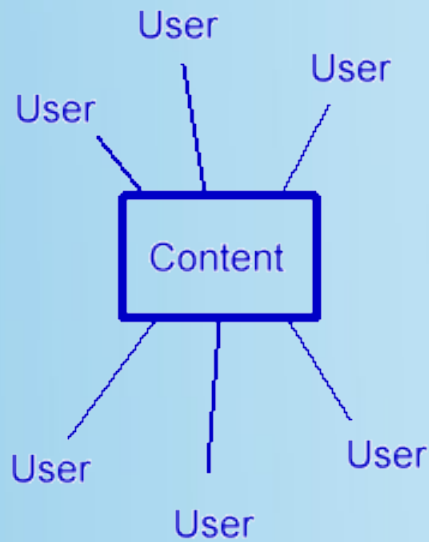

The focus is on the content…

Online Communities

… the focus is on the interaction

Online Learning Communities

- Include administrative tools, such as registrations

- Include user tools, such as home pages or profiles

- But mainly, integrate content and communication

Old

New
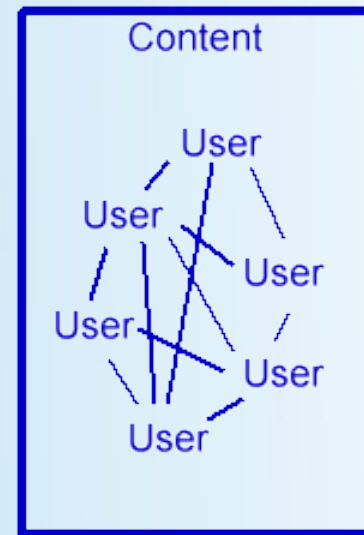
2. Why Create an Online Learning Community?

- Improved Learning
  - *I've discovered that the collaboration that occurs in such classroom communities is necessary for the process that others have called shared cognition.*

    Donald J Wienicki

    http://coen-nt1.idbsu.edu/DWiniecki/

  - *Collaboration exposes people to new ideas and outlooks on the topic at hand*

- Sense of Commitment
  - *People everywhere seem more interested in communicating with each other than with databases.*

    Howard Rheingold, The Virtual Community

    http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/

  - *Where people have a shared experience they gain a deeper sense of commitment to the process and to the product*

- Learning Beyond the Content
  - Creating *a "community of practice" that the student aspires to join; this term refers broadly to the practices of a field, its social organization, and its mores.*

    Douglas Gordin, et.al., Using the World Wide Web to Build Learning Communities in K-12

    http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue3/gordin.html

  - *Learning is more than just learning the content, it's learning how the content is applied in everyday interactions*

- Reduced Workload
  - *Instructors who must communicate – usually at great length – with each student individually will have no time for meals, curling or sleep*
  - *Classes where students enquire among and healp each other will limit the interaction between student and instructor to the essentials*

– *Groups become communities when they interact with each other and stay together long enough to form a set of habits and conventions, and when they come to depend upon each other for the accomplishment of certain ends.*

– *In truth, all communities learn.*

Wilson and Ryder, Dynamic Learning Communities: An Alternative to Designed Instructional Systems

http://www.cudenver.edu/~mryder/dlc.html

3. Components of Online Learning Communities

Admin	Content
Registration, support, library access, grades and stuff like that	Lessons, examples, exercises, outlines, resources
Interact	**User**
Discussion, email, chat rooms, ICQ	Home page, personal profile, customization

Admin

- Do it offline using tools such as gradebooks
  (eg.GradeStar http://www.shelltech.com/)

- Do it online using an instructional management system
  (eg. WebCT http://www.webct.com/)

Content

- Many ways to present content – the most popular is still the standard web page

- The IDEAS model:
  - **I**ntroduction / Objectives
  - **D**escription
  - **E**xamples
  - **A**ssignment
  - **S**ummary

More on Content

- Keep content short and to the point
- Online content must be brief – like this
- Use time as a measure of content
- Remember that the web is a *visual* medium

Interaction

- Many tools for interaction – *the* best resource is David Wooley's site:

    http://thinkofit.com/webconf/

- Use *multiple* forms of interaction – some people just don't *like* discussion boards

Content and Interaction

- ## Integrate content and interaction

OK, let's find out a little about you. Please click on the link below. A pop-up window will take you through a registration process, and then to a discussion list where you can introduce yourself. After you have posted your message, close the discussion list and click on 'Next Page', below.

Join the Discussion

In your introduction, answer the following questions:

1. How much internet experience do you have?

2. Do you have any experience creating courses for distance education or for the internet?

3. What are you expecting to learn from this session? Or, what are you hoping to learn from this session?

User

- The point of user tools is to allow a student to establish his/her own identity

- This means giving them things like web pages or personal profiles

- Hard to do without a course management tool – but you *can* get them to create GeoCities pages and link to them

4. Nurturing an Online Learning Community

Or… remembering that they are not machines…

Attributes of Successful Communities

- *Net.Gain* by Hagel and Armstrong
  - Distinctive focus
  - Integrate Content and Communication
  - Appreciate member-generated content
  - Access to multiple vendors
  - Commercial orientation

- *Hosting Web Communities*, Cliff Figallo
  - Member feels part of a larger whole
  - Web of relationships between members
  - Ongoing exchange between members
  - Relationships last through time

  Where these attributes exist, they solidify loyalty to the group, and therefore, to the Web site that supports its activities

Attributes of Successful Learning Communities

- – Focus on learning materials
- – Creation of a sense of whole
- – Integrate Content and Communication
- – Appreciate student-generated content
- – Ongoing communication between members
- – Access to multiple resources and info
- – Educational orientation
- – Sense of history

Managing Interaction

If the sage would guide the people, he must serve with humility. If he would lead, he must follow behind. – Lao Tzu

- The host – usually (but not necessarily) the instructor, must set the stage and act as a guide and a leader

Functions of the Facilitator

- Sharing enthusiasm – showing an interest in the topic and getting involved

- Facilitating productive conversation – acting as a moderator

- Linking users and content – providing information, resources, exercises, activities

Moderation

- Managing the pace of conversation – eg. Starting new topics, deleting old topics, reviving stalled topics

- Clarifying – outlining an issue, framing a problem, summarizing a discussion

- Conflict resolution – mediating, adjuducating

Relating to Students

- Establishing Trust – reliability, helpfulness, respect, encouragement

- Encouraging relationships – initiating chats, linking comments

- Backchannels – one-to-on communication, used for encouragement, advise, cautions, recruitment

Content and Interaction

- Orientation and instruction in conversational style and tactics

- Seeding conversation with content and activities

- Attention to community elements – who contributes, who doesn't, what are their styles - *personalize*

Community Standards

- Appropriate behavious – must be defined *in advance* and *enforced*

- *Standards creep* is the gradual drift away from community standards

Some Examples

- Diplomats Online – http://www.diplomatsonline.org

- Frontiers – http://www.tinman.com

- Online Learning Community for Support Staff – http://www.fhcrc.org/~learncom/index.html