

Building a Learning Community

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April 18, 2001

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This lecture has been made available by the kind assistance of TAFE Frontiers, Trinity Learning Innovation Centre and Austhink.

What is an Online Learning Community and Why Do We Want One?

What is an Online Learning Community?

- Includes administrative tools, such as registrations and grades
- Includes user tools, such as home pages or profiles
- But mainly, integrates educational content and communications

Examples

- MuniMall – <http://www.munimall.net>
- The Learning Space - <http://www.learningspace.org/> for teachers in Washington State
- Royal Roads - <http://modules.royalroads.ca/>
- eSocrates - <http://www.esocrates.com/>
- Bradley Learning Community - <http://www.housing.wisc.edu/Bradley/blctemp/>

Why an Online Learning Community?

- Improved Learning
- Sense of Commitment
- Learning Beyond the Content
- Reduced Workload

Improved Learning

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

Sense of Commitment

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

– *People everywhere seem more interested in communicating with each other than with databases.*

Howard Rheingold, The Virtual Community

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

Learning Beyond the Content

- Learning is more than just learning the content, it's learning how the content is applied in everyday interactions
 - *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.,
<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue3/gordin.html>

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 help each other will limit the interaction between student and instructor to the essentials

Lessons

- Learning communities are not classrooms; they are facilitated, not taught
- Participation and interaction are primary objectives, not merely tools
- Educational content is an environment, not a series of programmed texts
- The members create the community

Attributes of Successful Learning Communities

1. Focus on Learning Materials

- Communities need a distinct focus – Hegel and Armstrong, *Net.Gain*
- Learning materials form the riverbed on which community activities are grounded
- The objective is not to teach them the content, but to give them the content as a resource which they can use

2. Creation of a Sense of the Whole

- *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

3. Integrate Content and Communication

- Orientation and instruction in conversational style and tactics
- Seeding conversation with content and activities; seeding content with conversation and activities
- Attention to community elements – who contributes, who doesn't, what are their styles - *personalize*

4. Appreciate Participant Contributions

- 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

5. Ongoing Communications

- Communication and interaction are *primary* objectives
- Use *multiple* forms of interaction – some people just don't *like* discussion boards
- Many tools for interaction – *the* best resource is David Wooley's site:
<http://thinkofit.com/webconf/>

6. Access to Resources and Information

- The purpose is to *empower* students and help them build their own learning
 - *when students engage in school-based learning communities they must do more than be passive collectors of previously digested information – Gordin, et.al.,*
<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue3/gordin.html>

7. Educational Orientation

- Stream information; keep the focus on the new and the more complex
- Structure activities with a pedagogical purpose
- The objective is to get students to move beyond the material

8. Sense of History

- Learning does not begin and end with a class or a classroom
- Create a community which extends beyond courses and even beyond graduation
- Student contributions become an archive subsequent students can learn from and build on

Facilitating Online Learning Communities

The Guide by the Side

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

More Information

- For more information and references:

<http://www.downes.ca>