

# Building a Learning Community

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# 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>