

Building Community in an Online Course – Theories and Practices

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Abstract: The sense of community found in the traditional classroom is often lacking in the facelessness of the online course. This lack of community often results in high attrition rates and lack of satisfaction for students in online courses. This paper seeks to outline various strategies for building learning communities in online courses and provide the theoretical foundations for implementing community building techniques in online course design.

Introduction

My first experience with the world of online courses was in the 2000 – 2001 academic year. I had the opportunity to further my studies in graduate level statistics through an online program at a major university. Though the first two of these classes had been very interesting and enjoyable, the third class was a struggle to keep up with both academically and emotionally. I began to wonder what was so different between the first two and the last of these classes. In the first two classes, all students logged in from remote sites. Even those who were actually on campus logged in from their homes, or dorms, or computer labs. But the third class had its on campus students meet together and the off campus students login from their re mote sites. I noticed as this last semester progressed that a definite bond was being established between the professor and the students on campus that was not reaching out to those of us who were off campus. This had to be the difference. There was something to the bond or community that forms between students and the professor that effects the learning environment.

It is vitally important that students feel a connection to their fellow classmates and the professor in the online course. Once this connection is established, learning can thrive. What follows defines “community”, provides the theoretical framework for building learning communities, discusses benefits of community building, discusses the implications for online instructors, and outlines strategies for building community from a literature review and personal experience.

Community Defined

There are many different definitions of community. Morrison and Shrivastava (2001, Question 3, ¶ 3) define online learning communities as “groups of learners and instructors, supported by instructional and learning resources, pursuing common knowledge-interests in an online environment.” Rovai (April 2002, Sense of Community, ¶ 2) contends that the essence of community is found in “mutual interdependence among members, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals, and overlapping histories among members.” In a study conducted by Brown (2001) on the factors that brought about a feeling of community among learners, participants stated that the key to community was commonality. They went on to say that in a community the individual is not only responsible for his own learning, but also for the learning of his classmates. Rogers states that an essential component of community is “that the responsibility for learning is shared among group learners” (2002,Background, ¶ 1).

Using these definitions as a guide, community can be described as a dynamic bond that develops between students and instructor, founded in commonality and shared experiences, providing membership and support with the goal of facilitating learning for the individual, as well as the members of the group.

The Theoretical Framework

The support for community building is provided by the theories of Lev Vygotsky, Gordon Pask, and Jean Lave. Vygotsky's social cognition theory, a.k.a. social constructivism, asserts that the key to true learning is through social interaction (Smith & Ragan, 1999; Phillips, n.d.; Nicholl, 1998; Rozycki & Goldfarb, 2000). Looking through the lens of this theory, learning occurs in collaborative groups through which members negotiate meanings via dialogue (Smith & Ragan, 1999). According to Vygotsky, learning first occurs within the dialogue between people (interpersonal) and then becomes internalized as part of one's inner voice (intrapersonal) (Nicholl, 1998). The social dialogue described is considered a key factor in developing higher order mental skills (Nicholl, 1998). By increasing interaction and social involvement, students are pushed into higher levels of thinking (Phillips, n.d.).

Vygotsky also developed the idea of "zone of proximal development." Vygotsky defined the difference between what a student can achieve independently and what he can achieve with social support as the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Morris, 2002). Morris adds that it is within this zone that maximum instructional effectiveness occurs (2002). Instruction thus guides the student from his current skill level to his potential skill level with this social support (Phillips, n.d.). The key tool of instruction within the zone is language (VSC, n.d.), i.e. dialogue.

Gordon Pask's conversation theory has roots in Vygotsky's Social Cognition Theory. Conversation theory developed through an attempt to explain the way organisms and machines learn (*Conversation Theory (CT)*, n.d.). In conversation theory, Pask suggests that learning occurs through conversation. A crucial component of conversation theory is that of "teachback" or the ability of one student to teach another (*CT*, n.d.). As with Vygotsky, the key to learning is within the dynamic discussions among students.

Jean Lave's situated learning asserts, as Vygotsky, that learning is a "process of social participation" (Smith, 1996). Learning is increased as newcomers to the community develop cognitively and move from the periphery of the group to the center (Smith, 1996).

Synthesizing these theories indicates that in order to maximize learning potential within students, social interaction must be built into course structure. Students must be encouraged to engage in active conversation with the instructor, as well as, other students. As the learning community flourishes, the interaction between students increases and the interaction between students and instructor decreases. Thus, a collaborative environment results that is academically self-sufficient and is able to reduce the negative aspects of the online course.

Benefits of Building Community

Aside from the aforementioned benefit of increased learning, building community has other benefits. From the online classes that I have taught in the past, students cited inconvenience, home and work responsibilities, and long distances from a campus as educational hurdles that online learning has helped them overcome. Though these obstacles have been overcome, new obstacles have emerged. Some that I have heard from my own students and/or have read in the literature include a lack of physical contact with the instructor and classmates, a sense of separation, and a lack of camaraderie between students (Hiltz, 1998; De Simone, Lou, Schmid, 2001). As a result, dissatisfaction is increased and dropout rates are higher in distance education courses. Building a learning community has the potential to compensate for these new obstacles.

One of the primary concerns of distance education is higher dropout rates (Rovai, April 2002). Rovai suggests that building a strong sense of community increases the sense of connectedness and provides a support structure that encourages students to stay the course. Students often feel isolated in a computer-based instructional environment (De Simone, Lou, and Schmid, 2001). Building community brings students into contact with one another to reduce the feeling of isolation. Building community also reduces the sense of "loss of social relationships" that are normally found in the traditional classroom (Hiltz, 1998). Students enrolled in courses that exhibit a strong sense of community are less likely to burnout (Rovai, April 2002). Woods and Ebersole (2003) indicate that community building has the potential to reduce transactional distance or the perceived separation between the student and the course. A strong sense of community can be a motivating factor, as well. For students who are not academically self-disciplined, this encouragement is desperately

needed. So, why build a learning community? Community-building strategies have the potential to reduce the negative aspects of online courses, increase student retention, and foster greater learning.

Implications for Online Instructors

Like seeds, communities must be planted carefully and nurtured. Instructors must seek to intentionally build a dynamic social culture within the course (Woods & Ebersole, 2003). It is important to note that there is a balance between the social and academic aspects that must be maintained by the instructor (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Too much social activity can deter students from meeting the educational goals of the course.

The curriculum developed or chosen must emphasize interaction (VSC, n.d.). Materials that do not lend themselves to dialogue run the risk of destroying hard built communities. Within the curriculum, it is necessary to provide problems that create conflict (Phillips, n.d.). Conflict encourages dialogue and forces students to debate until a common understanding can be established. This type of problem solving helps students achieve higher levels of thinking (Rozycki & Goldfarb, 2000). Providing contextual activities and experts to interact with can encourage the development of strong communication (Phillips, n.d.).

The instructor must become a guide for students. An instructor's primary responsibility is to help grow students from their current skill level to their potential skill level (Phillips, n.d.). Basing teaching on students' next stage of development rather than their current can help this growth (Rozycki & Goldfarb, 2000). Scaffolding can also help students grow into their potential (VSC, n.d.). Scaffolding involves providing maximum guidance in the beginning stages of learning and then gradually withdrawing that guidance as students become more academically independent. According to Woods & Ebersole (2003), scaffolds provide safety and foundation to students within the community structure.

As a result of these instructional adjustments, assessment need also adapt. Assessment should include not only the traditional measures of independent skill, but also measures of guided skill. This type of assessment targets both the current and potential skill levels as outlined in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (VSC, n.d.).

Techniques for Building Community

The suggestions for fostering a learning community in an online course are numerous. Brief discussions of those that are more common or more creative follow. Not every suggestion will work for every course's content. The key will be to find those that will succeed within an instructor's course structure and with which the instructor is comfortable.

Autobiographies - Making connections is an important factor for building community. The use of autobiographies or introductions at the beginning of the course is highly encouraged by the literature (Palloff & Pratt, 1999) to aid in making these connections. Autobiographies help students to develop a "picture" of their classmates' personalities. Students can identify classmates with similar backgrounds, histories, and interests. This can be a jumping off point for future discussions. Students indicate that getting to know the members of the class early helped them to interact (Brown, 2001)

If students were willing, I would also recommend adding a picture to the autobiography. In a class I took last summer, one student posted a picture of her and her new husband. It had not occurred to me until then how much seeing the person can increase the sense of connection to that person. It also helps to take a way that sense of facelessness that you can have in an online course. It changes the course environment from what Turoff (1999) calls a "face-to-space" to more of a "face-to-face" environment.

Community Discussions - The most practical suggestion seems to be beginning a course with a discussion of community (Brown, 2001). Discussing the advantages of building a learning community and the instructors expectations in terms of the activities that will be used to build it can help students to better understand the course design and encourage student participation. Activities are much more successful when learners understand the goals of the exercise. It may be productive, as well as, interesting to have students help the instructor develop a working definition of community. Aside from personalizing the definition for students, it may give the instructor insight into the needs of the students. Brown (2001) suggests having students write

brief papers throughout the course on their contributions to the learning community, as well as, others' contributions, the benefits of the current community, and suggestions for improving the community.

Threaded Discussions - One of the more popular ways to build community is the use of classroom discussions. In an asynchronous learning environment this primarily involves a threaded discussion. Threaded discussions are an avenue for increasing active participation in the online class (Edelstein and Edwards, 2002). In order to make threaded discussions more effective, the literature suggests that participation in the discussion should be a component of the course grade (Klemm, 1998; Horton, 2000; Edelstein and Edwards, 2002). Standards for participation should be established in the beginning of the course (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Klemm (1998) encourages instructors to set a minimum number of postings and not to accept opinion only, but to challenge students to support their stances with research, analysis, and critical thinking. Assessing participation in threaded discussions thus “becomes an obvious cornerstone for successful learning community development” (Edelstein and Edwards, 2002, Introduction, ¶ 12).

Other factors to consider when using the threaded discussion are instructor participation, access restrictions, sensitive issues, time requirements, and information overload. Both Klemm (1998) and Horton (2000) remind the instructor of the importance of monitoring and responding to the discussions. Increased student participation is likely to result when the instructor takes an active role in the discussion. The instructor then becomes a model for participation, as well as, a source of encouragement and guidance (Klemm, 1998). According to Brown (2001, p. 14) this approach “helped community form more readily for more students in computer-mediated classes.” Restricted access to discussion boards may help students feel more comfortable posting opinions and feelings (Horton, 2000). Access should be restricted to the instructor and students only. If the course involves discussions on sensitive issues, the use of pen names by students may encourage higher levels of participation (Turoff, 1999; Horton, 2000). It is also important to examine the amount of time that the students have to complete discussions (Edelstein and Edwards, 2002). If students are expected to complete large amounts of assignments in a short period of time, online discussions may suffer. In addition to examining the time allotted for assignments, it is also important for the instructor to look at the amount of time that it will take to read the discussions. Threaded discussions run the risk of becoming overwhelming in size and requiring excessive amounts of time to read (Horton, 2000). It may be difficult for a student to read every posting. The amount of reading in the postings may also detract from the time spent on other meaningful course activities (Edelstein and Edwards, 2002).

Threaded discussions can also be transformed into controlled discussions if the operating environment allows. According to Turoff (1999) these types of discussions allow the instructor to post a discussion topic or question and block students from reading the responses of classmates until he has posted his own response. For instructors who are concerned about plagiarism, this is an excellent option. As a student, I have been a victim of discussion board plagiarism. The use of controlled discussions offers a measure of comfort and relief. Plagiarism is very destructive to community building.

It is important to note that even though a course discussion forum is established, students may not use it as often as the instructor may want. Horton (2000) reminds instructors to be realistic in their expectations of participation: subjects that do not lend themselves to discussion may not encourage high levels of participation. An algebra course, for example, may not elicit as much dialogue between students as a psychology course.

Instructors should also choose their words carefully when critiquing student postings. It is important to avoid harsh language, it may damage the bond between student and instructor (Woods & Ebersole, 2003). Woods and Ebersole suggest praising before criticizing. A colleague, Mark Williams, suggests that a student correction should come in the form PCP: Praise – Criticize – Praise. This form tends to lessen any stigma from being criticized.

Facilitating the development of a learning community is not the only advantage of threaded discussions. Threaded discussions provide a sense of acceptance for students who receive responses from fellow classmates (Brown, 2001). Brown further states that participation in lengthy threaded discussions confers membership in the community and instills feelings of worth. These types of discussions may encourage those who are shy to participate more actively than they would have in a traditional course (Horton, 2000). Threaded discussions allow the student time to reflect and revise comments before they are posted (Horton,

2000). Students may also be motivated to produce higher quality work since other students will be reading and responding to their opinions and research (Turoff, 1999).

Collaboration and Group Activities - Another popular strategy for group building is designing the course with collaborative learning activities. Turoff (1999) states that “the key to successful use of group communications technology” is the use of collaborative learning. Establishing collaborative learning groups can encourage students to bond and thus build community. Ideally the size for these groups should be less than ten students (Rovai, April 2002). These activities can include group projects, debates, group papers, threaded discussions (mentioned in C), group tests, group stories, role playing, group voting, and group list creating (Hiltz, 1998).

In assessing group activities, Klemm (1998) recommends peer grading. He suggests allowing students to rate the contribution value of the other members of the group. Should the instructor feel that students are uncomfortable with rating peers, the students can self-evaluate by identifying the student who helped them the most. For the students identified, bonus points can be awarded (Klemm, 1998).

As with threaded discussions there are additional benefits of collaborative learning. Scheduling problems can be more easily overcome and course participation increased (Klemm, 1998). Collaborative activities have also been shown to increase student satisfaction (Hiltz, 1998).

Building a Virtual Village - Providing places for students to ask questions, exchange ideas and insights, and get to know one another and the instructor is an effective tool for building community. Places such as a faculty office, pub, cafeteria, and library provide forums for students to communicate with each other and the instructor. The *Faculty Office* provides a space or “office” for students to ask technical questions and get help (Brown, 2001). This type of room helps students feel as though the instructor is more accessible and builds the bond between student and instructor. The *Pub* is a forum open to students only (De Simone, Lou, and Schmid, 2001). In this environment students can feel free to openly discuss issues about the course with each other. Essential to effective use of this forum is the inaccessibility of the pub by the instructor. The *Cafeteria* is a place that can be used for the exchange of casual comments (Brown, 2001). This feature allows students and the instructor to get to know each other on a more personal level, thus more effectively building the learning community. The *Library* provides a site for posting websites and references that may be of interest to others in the community (Brown, 2001). This site gives students a chance to take ownership in the course material by contributing items of personal interest connected with the course.

Veterans - According to Brown (2001) “Veteran students could help create online community or hinder its formation or both.” In order to capitalize on the first of these situations, instructors should enlist the help of those who are online course veterans to help build the learning community. Veterans can provide support to new students, both technical and emotional; model behavior; and, open the “circle of friends/acquaintances” to include not only veterans but also students new to the online course environment (Brown, 2001). By including veterans in the community building process, the instructor can deepen their sense of community and course ownership. Additionally, the responsibility for new learners and new learning is taken on by the veterans and modeled for the new learners. What better way to begin the bonding process?

Get Acquainted/Orientation Session - Though not as feasible but very effective is hosting a get acquainted/orientation session at the beginning of the semester. This is a technique that was used by Bossier Parish Community College where I taught my first online courses. There is a lot of merit to this idea. As instructors, we were able to orient students to the online environment and do some ice breaking with them. For students, it allowed them to associate an actual person with their instructor rather than a computer screen. It also allowed them to meet classmates and begin establishing connections. The downside is that these sessions are not always feasible. Distance, date, and time conflicts inevitably exclude some students from this initial meeting. This runs the risk of alienating some students before the course even begins.

Chat Rooms - Providing a room for synchronous interaction between students is an “excellent tool for building community”(Horton, 2000, Chat Room, ¶ 3). Chat rooms provide a forum for conferences and casual conversations but are not very effective for in depth discussions (Horton, 2000). Chat rooms do however reduce student anxiety about difficulties resulting from interacting with other students and the delayed

responses of threaded discussions and e-mail, as well as, increase student presence in the course (Woods and Ebersole, 2003). Woods and Ebersole suggest establishing Virtual Office Hours for students to chat and interact with other students, as well as, the instructor.

Metaphors - De Simone, Lou, and Schmid (2001) describe the use of a metaphor to build community. The hope was that by using a metaphor to which students could relate a feeling of familiarity would develop within the online environment. In the authors' online course, a ship metaphor was used to relate the instructor, students, and course activities. The instructor was described as the captain and the students as shipmates. The class activities became tasks necessary for the well being of the ship.

The results were positive for De Simone, Lou, and Schmid (2000). The students really grabbed hold of the ship metaphor. Often times comments made would refer to the metaphor. Examples of comments included "a storm is coming up ahead" when students were confused; "I'll keep watch for icebergs" when new processes were still be learned; and, "searching for lost crew members" when fellow shipmates had not been heard from in awhile (De Simone, Lou, and Schmid, 2000, Use of the Metaphor, ¶ 2 & 3). The students even went so far as to name the ship (De Simone, Lou, and Schmid, 2001).

Personalized Communication - One role of the instructor is to act as encourager for students (Rovai, April 2002). Woods and Ebersole (2003) suggest becoming the encourager by sending personal communications to students several times during the semester. Instructors can send positive thoughts, concerns, updates, feedback, and tips to students. This type of personalized communication increases perceived interaction and reduced transactional distance (Woods and Ebersole, 2003).

Instructors should also be sure to use students names in responses and to touch on personal information shared during introductions whenever appropriate (Woods and Ebersole, 2003). Such responses validate a student's presence in the class and help the student to feel "heard." Inclusion of emoticons or symbols to express missing body language (i.e. :) for smiling) can also help personalize communication with students (Woods and Ebersole, 2003). Communication of this type allows the instructor and the student to share bits of the personality that may get lost in the computer delivery. Thus, participants become more real.

These strategies do not represent an exhaustive list, nor are they the cure all for building community. Responsibility for community building lies in part within the learner. Brown (2001) reminds instructors that students must be open to community before it can be grown. She also notes that though a strong community may exist among most learners, it may not exist for all learners.

A few words of caution... Regardless of the activity chosen, successful implementation depends on the previously mentioned transformation from instructor to facilitator (See "V. Implications for Online Instructors"). Each activity focuses on learner-centered learning rather than instructor-centered learning. For those of us who have been taught and have been teaching primarily in this instructor-centered style, this may not be the easiest of transformations.

The decision to build an effective learning community will require the instructor to adequately prepare for the course well in advance. These are not techniques that can be implemented "on the fly." Facilitators must spend time researching and discerning the activities that are most appropriate for their target audience and their course content. It is imperative that facilitators become comfortable with both the delivery system and the process of community building chosen for the course.

Lastly, community building requires the facilitator to be flexible. Inevitably, some activities will not turn out as expected. Hopefully, some turn out better than expected. But, for those that fall short, the facilitator must be open to adjustments.

The Technical/Administrative Needs of Community

In order to effectively implement these community building strategies, instructors must address the technical and administrative needs of the course. Instructors must help students become accustomed to the operating environment and the facelessness of the online course (Brown, 2001). Students who are still trying to maneuver about the course will not have adequate time to engage in course interaction (Horton, 2000).

Course sizes should also be kept at levels capable of facilitating the growth of community, as well as, be manageable in light of the course activities. Smaller classes increase the interaction among participation and thus improve community building (Rovai, April 2002). But, if the course size is too small, there may not be enough interaction generated to build a strong community (Rovai, April 2002). Rovai (April 2002) has determined that the optimal number of students for building community in an online course is a minimum of eight to ten and a maximum of twenty to thirty for a single instructor.

Immediacy in course response is a must for community building. Lack of timely response in an online course can create course apathy. Woods and Ebersole (2003) suggest that instructors strive to respond to student emails and postings within 24-hours. The authors also encourage responses to be sent a various times of the day. "Students eventually develop an expectation of presence" as a result of the response rate of the instructor (Woods and Ebersole, 2003, Immediacy, ¶ 2). This expectation can encourage or discourage active participation in the learning community.

Conclusions

The strategies outlined seek to encourage active participation in online classes and thereby build a dynamic community of learners. Through interaction and collaboration students will facilitate learning for themselves and fellow classmates, as well as, provide support and acceptance. Utilizing personal experience and history as a component of the course, students will be able to build the community foundations on commonality.

The benefits of community building include providing students with adequate emotional and academic support and reducing feelings of isolation (Rovai, April 2002). These are exactly the components I was missing from my last online statistics course. Brown (2001, p. 17) sums up community building perfectly:

"Community-building should be emphasized not just for the sense of togetherness it provides students, but also to help keep students in the class and in the program, to promote full engagement in the class, to facilitate effective collaborative learning, and to encourage continued communication after the course or program is complete for development and career services purposes."

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