

Learning Communities and the Online Classroom

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Teachers have been trying to motivate students and increase learning outcomes since teaching became a profession. With the explosion of the internet and digital communication, online classrooms are increasing in frequency (Bond-Hu and Fiorello 2003). Online instruction also continues to grow in technology and sophistication (Arbaugh 2000). One issue that plagues online classes and learning is that learners feel isolated, disconnected and unsatisfied (Hill 2002). Also, according to McInnerney and Roberts (2004), “studying in an online environment, social interaction with peers and educators can often be an exercise in frustration The inability to interact freely with other students may exacerbate feelings of aloneness, and provide a less-than-ideal environment for successful study”. They do not engage with the content and curriculum as they do in a traditional classroom. This is an issue of growing concern as online education becomes more prevalent. According to Hill (2002), “creating a community of learners is one strategy that has been recommended”. How it affects learning will be discussed as well as issues that detract from or prevent the formation of community in the online environment. Finally, some methods that promote and assist instructors and facilitators in building the online learning community will be discussed.

In a traditional classroom, students come in, sit down, and get ready for a class session. They do this several times per week—sometimes every day. McInnerney and Roberts (2004) point out that “on campus, students tend to assemble and interact before, during and at the conclusion of class. This is where friendships are formed using a myriad of communication styles and activities”. They talk with each other. They watch each other. They watch the

instructor and talk with the instructor. They get to know each other. They push limits. They learn what is expected and what to expect. They discuss, laugh, and talk amongst each other. They learn what to expect from each other in class discussions. They learn from each other, from the instructor, and from the content. They learn from observing each other interact with the content. In essence they form a community. This is the typical setting that has been prevalent in all classrooms since the advent of public education. The teaching models have changed and evolved, but the basic sense of community and interaction has remained. Given the setting and setup, how could it not? The students meet and interact with each other on a regular basis (multiple times per week in most cases). With this level of interaction, community forms. When students feel a sense of community, they start to trust the instructor and other students in the classroom. They trust that they can express themselves and be free to have divergent opinions from others in the class. Without the community, students would miss out on learning that happens from being part of a community. While it is true that learning can happen individually without being part of a community, it's important to note that being part of a learning community can lead to faster and more diverse learning. Bielaczyc and Collins (1983) state, "In a learning community the goal is to advance the collective knowledge and in that way to support the growth of individual knowledge. The defining quality of a learning community is that there is a culture of learning, in which everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding". This culture of learning adds value to the knowledge and learning outcomes are increased. Bielaczyc and Collins (1983) also states that learners value the knowledge learned in a community more since they trust the community. They attach more significance to what they learn. It makes more of an impact since they connect it to their sense of each other, the learning community, and their environment.

With all of the beneficial effects of community on student learning, it is important to ensure that learning communities form in all sorts of learning environments that include more than one learner. Online learning classrooms have exploded in recent years. More and more traditional institutions are offering online classes and some universities only offer online courses. One of the issues with online classrooms is the lack of natural community.

In the traditional classroom, community forms somewhat naturally. Students meet regularly. In such an environment, community naturally forms. The bonds of community form as students observe each other and interact each with each other. They learn what to expect each other. They learn to trust each other. They learn how to react to each other. This all happens without much conscious thought. The instructor has to do very little extra to help form the community. Since social interaction and community formation are natural in a traditional classroom, McInnerney and Roberts (2004) state that, "In the face-to-face classroom, students are expected to absorb knowledge and social interaction is not given a lot of consideration". Part of this naturally formation comes from proximity and being together, part comes from the synchronous nature of the interactions. If an online classroom is completely synchronous, then the natural community has a stronger chance to form. However, the majority of online classrooms are mostly asynchronous in nature. The students do not meet at the same time. They often, interact with the course content at very different times. Since students are separated by both time and distance, the natural sense of community often fails to form without some specific and, sometimes, artificial methods.

One of the reasons that community does not form naturally in online environments is that students can hide behind the digital wall of anonymity. Students do not know each other. They, probably, have never met each other. While the digital anonymity is beneficial in the sense that

students can feel more empowered to state their beliefs and opinions, it does not create a sense of trust between classmates and the instructor. McInnerney and Roberts (2004) state “the level of trust between all involved in the educational process has to be high if a sense of community is to develop”. Without the trust, community cannot form. While the digital wall exists, efforts must be taken to draw out students so that the trust level can rise.

In a traditional classroom, students more likely than not, have some experience with one another. They know who a large number of their classmates are. They may have even had classes with them before. In smaller programs or communities, they may have had many classes with each other. They already know what to expect from each other. Online students don't have this advantage. Most likely, they have never met. They don't know what to expect from each other.

Other issues exist in the online classroom as well. In a traditional setting, students that do not participate are more easily noticed and the instructor can pull them in with group activities, direct questioning techniques, and other methods. Online, it is far easier to not participate and harder for the instructor to notice students that are not participating. Students can read the discussion posts and not contribute. What they do read may not impact them as much since they do not feel the connection with other students or the instructor. They don't engage with what they read as much if they aren't participating.

Since online other forms of distance-based education lack the natural formation of community, it's important to include calculated, artificial, forms of community building. McInnerney and Roberts (2004) state, “techniques such as the incorporation of protocols and guidelines for social interaction into the learning concepts of the online environment can be utilized to minimize the feelings of aloneness that affect many students and increase the sense of

community. The students who participated in one “case study suggested that a ‘warm-up’ period be incorporated into the course structure. They wanted an informal setting where they could become familiar with each other’s communication style, online personalities, level of commitment and learn how to develop a presentation of ‘self’” (McInnerney and Roberts 2004). This warm-up period could include ice-breaker activities. This sounds like a party game but in practice, provide a means to several important aspects of building community if done properly. The first aspect is that students will begin to get to know each other. If the ice-breakers are done properly, students will begin to understand how each other think, write, and communicate. They will also learn some about each other’s lives. With properly facilitated interactions during ice-breakers, critical thinking skills are developed when responding to each other’s offerings.

It is important, when designing and implementing ice-breaker activities, to include components that force students to create thoughtful and descriptive elements, interact with each other’s postings in a respectful and thorough manner, and reveal elements of themselves that can start to create bonds between students. For example, an ice-breaker that requires students to express expectations that they have of the instructor and the course and the reasons for those expectations in a discussion format might fulfill these requirements if the students are required to respond to each other’s postings in a thoughtful manner.

Self-introductions are another good method that help students begin to know each other and allow them to warm-up to the online classroom. With self-introductions, students share aspects of their lives and beliefs that will inform how they interact and participate in the classroom. Self-introductions allow students to present themselves and start forming the bonds of trust that are required for community to form in the online environment.

Another method that helps form community, especially between the instructor and the students is to set proper expectations for communication including appropriateness, time-frames, and procedures. It's important for students to know what is expected of them and what is not appropriate. A good netiquette lesson is essential for students to know how to communicate with each other and the instructor. It can be part of the icebreaker activities and outline what is expected when it comes to email communication, discussion board postings, and discussion board responses. It also informs students as to what is not appropriate. This puts all students on the same level. They know how their participatory efforts will be responded to. It's also important to enforce these rules when violations happen. Quick action is need to keep the student trust.

Besides netiquette, it's important for students to know how and what method to use when contacting the instructor. The instructor should provide students with multiple means of communication and also include preference and expected response time. The instructor should also adhere to the published response time and even exceed it in most cases. This helps students feel a sense of being cared for and respected which help to build trust and allow the learning community to form.

Other community building methods that can be employed is a shift to more discussion based assessment in an asynchronous environment. More discussions help to draw more of a personality out from the students and allows more familiarity between the students. Other methods that might help is to conduct more synchronous activities as well. It's through synchronous meetings in the traditional classroom that community naturally forms so more synchronous activity in the online environment will have the same effect.

One of the driving aspects of any classroom is the personality and demeanor of the instructor. In an online classroom, this is more subdued and more often, the personality of instructors does not come through in online environments. This is unfortunate. It's through common experiences with the instructor, including personality and demeanor that students can form bonds. The instructor should let their humor, passion, and personality shine through in their communications, discussion facilitation, and feedback. This gives a sense of humanity to the course and students will make a stronger connection with the instructor if they see them as a person rather than an obscure figure.

Online classrooms are becoming more prevalent. It is the wave of the future and it's important to keep the quality of the education high in the online environment. Community forms naturally in the traditional classroom. In the online environment, it is not so natural. Students can hide behind digital anonymity and not connect as strongly with classmates and instructors. It's easier for students to not participate and harder for instructors to notice those students. Students do not share proximity and are not interacting socially since they are often separated by distance and time zones. In order for the online classroom to benefit from the same sense of community, deliberate and somewhat artificial means must be employed to foster it. Deliberate warm up or ice-breaker activities must be part of the beginning of every class. These activities can include discussions and writings that engage students and have them express opinions and employ critical thinking in their initial posts as well as responses to peers. They can also employ self-introductions. Proper expectations for netiquette, communication methods and preferences, and response times is crucial as well. The instructor should also not be afraid to let their personality shine through in discussion facilitation, communication, and feedback to students.

All of these methods should help foster community and increase the learning outcomes for students in online classrooms.

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