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Building Community in Online Classrooms, an Annotated Bibliography

One of the most significant challenges in online courses is the lack of natural community. In a traditional classroom, learners meet on a regular basis—often multiple times per week. In this type of environment, a sense of community naturally forms. It still needs direction from the instructor, but the foundations are already in place. Additionally, learners are, for the most part, based in geographically similar locations. This similarity creates possibilities for learner interaction outside of class (i.e. Other classes, off campus locations, or activities). In the online classroom, these conditions rarely exist. The natural camaraderie and sense of community will not develop since learners are separated by time and distance. Additionally the digital wall of the internet provides a sense of anonymity and isolation that can lead to students getting lost in hustle and bustle of class activities. It's difficult to notice students who are not participating. Instructors must introduce new activities, practices, and methods so that the sense of community is developed and the learning community is formed. I'm interesting in pursuing research on best practices, methods, and activities that help to promote community in online classrooms. I've directed my research in this annotated bibliography with that in mind.

Arbaugh, J. B. (2000). Virtual classroom versus physical classroom: An exploratory study of class discussion patterns and student learning in an asynchronous internet-based mba course. *Journal of Education Managment*, *24*(2), 213-233. doi: 10.1177/105256290002400206

A study was designed in which two different sections of a graduate class in a MBA program at a Midwestern U.S. university. One class was delivered in a traditional format in a traditional classroom. The other section was delivered online via an LMS called LearningSpace. The study was conducted in 1997 and is designed to measure student performance and discussion patters in the traditional classroom versus the online classroom. With the exception of an initial meeting to go over course software and a final meeting for feedback and reflection, the internet based course did not meet during the period that the course was administered. One of the major findings in the study was that women tended to engage in discussion more frequently in the internet based course. Also, student learning did not appear to diminish in the online course. The article provides a snapshot of online learning nearly two decades ago and shows similar issues with the environment and community building. The study helps show me that the sense of community is and has been important in any learning environment and that even more effort is required to help create that community in an online course.

Bond-Hu, D. & Fiorello, P. (2003). Design Strategies for Building Community in Online
Classrooms. In C. Crawford et al. (Eds.), Proceedings of Society for Information
Technology & Teacher Education International Conference 2003 (pp. 2350-2354).
Chesapeake, VA: AACE. Retrieved March 17, 2014 from http://www.editlib.org/p/18441.

While this article is not so much a study, but an analysis of the current state of online learning.
There are discussions of current issues and problems with online learning and focuses on the loss of
community learners might feel. Probably causes are discussed and various methods of how to build
the community in the online environment are given. The article discusses the transactional-based
models of online education. This article will actually be tremendously helpful for me in my research
area. One of the areas of focus for me is how to increase the sense of community. There are
numerous examples here and include with those examples are the methodologies and theories
behind their success.

Conrad, D. (2005). Building and maintaining community in cohort-based online learning. *Journal
of Distance Education*, 20(1), 1-20. Retrieved from
http://search.proquest.com/docview/214483094?accountid=9649

This study followed graduate students as they worked online in their program. Data was collected
several times over a five year period. The students underwent initial baseline testing. It was mostly
qualitative in nature and include surveys, interviews, and questionnaires. The study looks to answer
questions like "How does a sense of community develop and who develops it?" and "Does every
online group find its sense of community?" The program used WebCT for delivery and did require
two sessions of face-to-face meetings during the two year master's program. The study found that,
while initially concerned with online environments, they expected support from instructors and
administrators. While that support was delivered, toward the end of their degree program, leaners
stated to see the sense of community developing from other sources such as fellow students,
spouses, and the sense of belonging. One of the main community building techniques that was
employed was threaded discussion forums to encourage participation and interaction with peers and
the instructors. This study furthers my research and provides evidence that once solid community
building practices are in place, the natural sense of community that is lost when translating from the
traditional classroom to the online can be regained and created even if extra steps have to be taken
to start the process.

Hill, J. R. (2002). Overcoming obstacles and creating connections: Community building in web-
based learning environments. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, *14*(1), 67-86. doi:
10.1007/BF02940951

Janet Hill, author of Chapter 11 in our course text-book, discusses building a community of learners
as a means of increasing the quality, participation, and engagement of learners in the online

classroom. She addresses the questions that are being asked about online learning like, "Why is it important to establish a community within a learning context?".   She discusses issues and challenges associated with community building. Some of the issues discussed are space issues such as isolation and disconnections, no face-to-face contact. Time is another factor that affects online environments. Learners are not used to working in an asynchronous environment. She discusses in detail, many methods of creating a sense of community in the online classroom like creating a psychologically safe environment, helping learners to create good web-based learning habits, and reminding that the learner that someone is out there to connect with. The article, much like the chapter in our text-book provides me with many great methodologies and the educational theories behind them that will help with my research and my practice as an online teacher. It also does a good job of identifying some of the major issues that plague some online courses.

McInnerney, J. M., & Roberts, T. S. (2004). Online learning: Social interaction and the creation of a sense of community. *Educational Technology and Society*, *7*(3), 73-81. Retrieved from http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.126.3225&rep=rep1&type=pdf

This article focuses on a topic that, I feel, is the most significant issue with online education—the sense of isolation that learners may feel when participating in an online course. It also discusses a topic that I find interesting and that has a factor in online learning situations—the virtual self. The virtual self is what people present to the online world. We all have experience with this as we use Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. We tend to interact in ways that may not be the same as we would in a face-to-face meeting. The paper also describes some methods to overcome the sense of isolation and the differences in the real self and virtual self. It talks about social context and how it is important to online learning and other educational theories that tie in to online community and online learning. The article helps my research as it focuses on a point that other studies and papers have not yet—the virtual self.