

Implementing Successful Online Learning Communities

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the number of courses using online learning has increased significantly and based on student demand; continued growth is projected. Although distance learning is well accepted, when compared to traditional classroom learning, lower student satisfaction, higher student attrition, and concerns about quality have been reported (Rovai, 2002a; Rovai, 2002b). The absence of “community” has been associated with each of these issues and this has stimulated research about how to successfully build a community in a virtual environment, to overcome these challenges.

Successful online learning communities are also important for most blended learning courses (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Discussion boards and other tools are being increasingly used to supplement instruction during traditional classroom courses. Therefore, across most courses in higher education today it is imperative that faculty members know how to establish and sustain successful online learning communities.

The goals of this article are to a) define “online learning community” and delineate the factors that contribute to a successful learning community, b) review the evidence supporting the importance of a learning community in distance and online learning, and c) recommend strategies to promote achievement of a successful learning community.

BACKGROUND

Community

Learning communities can occur in a variety of settings. For example, community is present not only in the traditional classroom setting but also the virtual online setting. Across all these settings, a learning

community exists when there is spirit, trust, interaction, interdependence, and achievement of a set of common goals such as the learning objectives established for a course (Rovai, 2002a; Rovai, 2002b; Rovai & Jordan, 2004).

An online learning community is defined as a bonded group of learners who interact with each other in a virtual learning environment and share their perspectives and during this process construct knowledge (Schwier, 2001; Luppigini, 2003). For interaction, the virtual learning environment may use either synchronous formats such as collaborative software, video-conferencing, and chat rooms or asynchronous formats such as discussion boards, email, blogs, and wikis. An online learning community may occur either in a virtual online course or be a component of a blended learning course.

Interaction is the foundation of an effective learning community. Roblyer and Wiencke have defined interaction as “a created environment in which both social and instructional messages are exchanged among the entities in the course, and in which messages are both carried and influenced by the activities and the technology resources being employed” (Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003). There are four types of interaction that occur during a course: 1) learner-content, 2) learner-learner, 3) learner-instructor, and 4) learner-interface (Moore, 1989; Hillman, Willis, Gunawardena, 1994). Interaction results in communication, collaboration, and exchange of information and these outcomes are essential for a successful learning community.

Course management systems enable instructors to post learning resources and set up discussion boards; however, this alone will not build community during an online course. In order for an online learning community to successfully evolve, the instructor must also effectively direct and facilitate learners so that they

build cohesion and trust and become actively engaged in group learning.

A successful online learning community occurs when the following are achieved: 1) students perceive the learning experiences to be enjoyable and also effectively enhance their knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes, 2) students achieve the learning outcomes established for the course, and 3) there are high retention and graduation rates.

Garrison, Anderson and Archer developed the “Community of Inquiry” framework to guide research and understanding about teaching and learning in a computer-mediated environment (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) (see Figure 1). This framework asserts that community and learning occur when teachers and learners come together and there are three overlapping elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2003; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Social presence is defined as the ability of learners to display their emotions and interact socially so that they are perceived as “real people” (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). As a course evolves, this interaction must progress from group bonding to purposeful relationships that facilitate accomplishment of

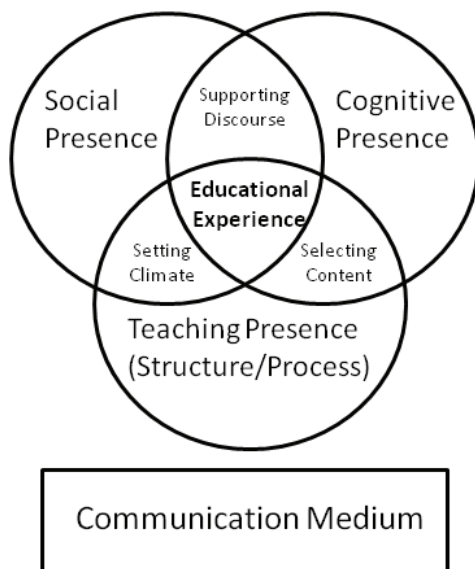
the course learning goals (Garrison 2007; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). This requires a safe and comfortable environment so that learners are at ease in expressing their thoughts.

Cognitive presence is defined as the exploration, integration of knowledge, and resolution of a problem or issue by means of continuous reflection and collaborative discourse (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Development and growth of critical thinking skills occurs with cognitive presence. Garrison and Arbaugh have described cognitive process using a practical inquiry model which consists of the following four phases: 1) a triggering event in which students identify an issue or problem that needs inquiry, 2) exploration of the issue or problem which involves both reflection and discourse, 3) integration which requires learners to construct meaning from what was learned during the exploration phase, and 4) resolution which requires learners to apply their new knowledge to other situations or workplace settings (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Garrison and Arbaugh note learners have a difficult time moving beyond the phases of problem identification and exploration and that this is a major reason why cognitive presence is the most challenging type of presence to develop during an online course (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Teaching presence refers to the course design, facilitation, and direct instruction that promotes achievement of social presence and cognitive presence and ultimately results in achievement of course learning outcomes. (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Course design involves creating a blend of learning activities that best accomplish the learning goals and developing a course schedule that ensures accomplishment of these activities and goals. Facilitation of learning involves responding to student questions, asking questions that promote student learning, and encouraging students to achieve deeper understanding and application of course content. Direct instruction involves monitoring how well learning is occurring, assessing the discourse, and using this information to refine instruction. There are some studies suggesting that some students can only discern two instructor roles: course design and directed facilitation (Shea, 2006; Arbaugh, 2007).

Garrison has suggested a leadership role is fulfilled during a course when an instructor provides both facilitation and direct instruction (Garrison, 2007). Shea and colleagues demonstrated that a sense of community

Figure 1. Community of Inquiry – Elements of an Educational Experience (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000)



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