Creating and Sustaining Online Learning Communities

Jo B. Paoletti
University of Maryland, USA

INTRODUCTION

What is an online community? Is any Web-based course, e-mail list, or membership-based discussion forum an online community? What is the relationship of online communities to traditional, face-to-face communities? In what ways are they same; how are they different?

A dictionary definition of community offers a basic understanding of the concept of community: "a group of people living together or sharing something in common, such as interests or vocations" (*The World Book Dictionary*, 1990, p. 420).

As educators, we should recognize that our courses, programs, departments, campuses, and professional societies all constitute communities, by virtue of being groups of people connected by a common interest or experience. While it is customary to see "community" as a positive entity, as McKnight and Kretzmann (1993) point out, there are strong communities and weak communities.

Each time a person uses his or her capacity, the community is stronger and the person more powerful. That is why strong communities are basically places where the capacities of local residents are identified, valued, and used. Weak communities are places that fail, for whatever reason, to mobilize the skills, capabilities, and talents of their residents or members. (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1993, p. 11)

Therefore, it follows that academic communities are not necessarily or automatically strong, supportive, and healthy. Given that a class, living-learning program, and a professional society are already communities, the questions become: "How can online activities support or enhance community in the educational setting?" and "What is different and unique about online communities that may require specialized techniques to create and sustain them?"

For our purposes, an online community is a group of individuals with a common interest who interact *primarily* online. While they may meet face to face or even live, or work in the same location, the "online community" end of the continuum needs to predominate. In fact, the distinction between an online community and a face-to-face community is unnecessarily dichotomous. There are many online communities that include face-to-face components or interactions, and it is commonplace for a thriving "real" community to extend or support its activities through a listserv, Web site, or other digital medium. While there is no set length of existence that defines a community (as distinct from a working group), the assumption is that it is sustained over multiple interactions and even changes in membership. Such communities may be expected to gradually develop their own culture, composed of habits, rules, and traditions (Kimball, 1999). The lifespan of a community may be finite (the duration of one course or conference) or open ended. The most common type of finite online learning community is course based, limited to a single academic term. The listservs of academic societies and other organizations have an open-ended lifespan—theoretically infinite. An online learning community may be private (membership limited to students enrolled in the course, or journal subscribers) or public (any interested person may join).

This article addresses one specific kind of online learning community—the online or hybrid class—but the basic concepts can easily be applied to the far-flung members of a research team, or even members of an alumni group or other campus-related organization. Whatever the membership, and whatever the technology selected—bulletin boards, listservs, or blogs—intentional online communities do not create or sustain themselves, but require careful planning, sensitive leadership, and an ongoing commitment on the part of the group's members.

BACKGROUND

When distance learning was in its infancy—in the days of paper-based correspondence courses—the student and teacher were usually separated by miles, working in mutual isolation. At its best, a correspondence course could be an experience in deep mentoring, a two-way conversation between teacher and student, but it could not begin to replicate the social and intellectual interaction of the classroom. Early educational use of computers also tended to focus on the solitary learner. I recall an experience in "programmed learning" in a nutrition class at Syracuse University in 1968, sitting at a terminal connected to the campus mainframe and working my way through a series of exercises about vitamins and other nutrients. The development of electronic mail, chat, and bulletin board systems opened up new possibilities that were not only more interactive, but could also include more participants. The correspondence course model gave way to the idea of virtual learning communities. The metaphorical language of electronic commons and virtual lounges dates back to the early 1990s, and the optimistic pioneer days of newsgroups, listservs, bulletin board systems, and text-based role-playing games. These important experiments promised a future of far-flung yet intimately connected online learning communities. The two main formats were mailing lists, or listservs, connected either to a course or a professional society, and virtual worlds, powered by software originally developed for role-playing games. The creation of HTML and the World Wide Web, and the introduction of graphical browsers for the Internet between 1992 and 1994 further accelerated this transformation. In 2004, millions of students worldwide were enrolled in courses taught fully or primarily online

The serendipitous coincidence of the emergence of the World Wide Web and the burgeoning of campus-based learning communities, including Freshman Interest Groups and living-learning programs, both enriches and complicates the discussion of online communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Many of these new programs had online components, and similar claims were made for both virtual and real learning communities, often without much critical thought about the pragmatic differences between them. Their commonalities included the concept of creating a smaller, more intimate or specialized social group, the expectation that there would be more and deeper interactions between individuals, and reliance on a less hierarchical and more cooperative power structure (Bass, 1998). The outcomes: unity, a sense of connectedness and belonging, and ultimately, a more supported learning experience were also shared (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Mattthews, & Smith, 1990). The question with online communities was whether they could ever completely replicate the traditional classroom, or if they did not, did they offer new advantages in compensation?

Online communities used in education have taken a variety of forms, and new ones continue to emerge. Before the availability of graphical interfaces, text-based communities flourished. Local grassroots BBSs (bulletin board services) offered free or low-cost access to both real-time chat and asynchronous threaded discussions. Nationally based ISPs such as AOL, Prodigy, and Compuserve also offered "communities" organized by topic. Online gaming technology such as MUDs and MOOs found a ready audience of users among tech-savvy educators intrigued by the possibilities of virtual spaces that could be shaped by the users themselves. E-mail listservs emerged as another potential nexus of community, whether for a professional organization or a class.

The debut of Mosaic and other graphical Web browsers and increasingly fast Internet connections have encouraged the development of visually rich online environments to support learning. MOOs and MUDs traded text-based spaces and rooms for colorful 3-D buildings populated by digital avatars or icons representing users. Audio and video materials could even be added to further replicate the face-to-face experience.

CREATING AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

In the early 21st century, there are more variations of these formats, but the basic variables—format of discourse, community lifespan, and membership—have not changed.

Discourse formats within an online learning community can be synchronous (real time) or asynchro-

Related Content

Online Behavior Modeling: An Effective and Affordable Software Training Method
Charlie Chen, Terry Ryanand Lorne Olfman (2008). *Online and Distance Learning: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 1689-1705).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/online-behavior-modeling/27499

Expert Systems in Distance Education
Duygu Mutlu-Bayraktarand Esad Esgin (2015). *Artificial Intelligence Applications in Distance Education (pp. 136-148).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/expert-systems-in-distance-education/114444

A Dashboard to Monitor Self-Regulated Learning Behaviours in Online Professional Development
Flavio Manganello, Francesca Pozzi, Marcello Passarelli, Donatella Persicoand Francesca Maria Dagnino (2021). *International Journal of Distance Education Technologies (pp. 18-34).*
www.irma-international.org/article/a-dashboard-to-monitor-self-regulated-learning-behaviours-in-online-professional-development/270699

The Design and Prototyping of the Chronobot System for Time and Knowledge Exchange
Shi-Kuo Chang, Anupama Kapoor, Ganesh Santhanakrishnanand Chirag Vaidya (2005). *International Journal of Distance Education Technologies (pp. 18-33).*
www.irma-international.org/article/design-prototyping-chronobot-system-time/1655

The Effects of Faculty Status, Faculty Gender, Field of Study, and Class Size on the Use of Blogs, Wikis, and Discussion Boards
Dazhi Yangand Caile E. Spear (2017). *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education (pp. 52-64).*
www.irma-international.org/article/the-effects-of-faculty-status-faculty-gender-field-of-study-and-class-size-on-the-use-of-blogs-wikis-and-discussion-boards/176359