

Chapter 59

Cultivating Community in Online and Blended Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of social media networking sites like Facebook and Twitter demonstrates how communities can develop and flourish in virtual spaces. How can higher education institutions and instructors leverage the power of community to enhance student learning without compromising the rigor that is foundational to the academy? Building on the scholarly literature and their own experiences teaching and providing faculty development in online and blended learning environments, the authors provide a rationale for cultivating community in online environments as well as provide descriptive cases of instructors who have effectively used a learning management system to cultivate vibrant learning communities in online and hybrid courses. They also offer multiple faculty development models for helping faculty develop a social, teaching, and cognitive presence in online environments.

INTRODUCTION

A Rationale for Cultivating Community

With an estimated 96% of public and private colleges and universities now offering online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2006), it is not surprising that the academic community has seen increased research, writing, and professional development related to effective online teaching and learning. Since dropout rates among distance education students are 10-20% higher than those of students in traditional face-to-face courses (Carr, 2000), one research focus has been related to identifying and mediating factors that might contribute to student success, satisfaction, and persistence in online courses. Researchers have identified

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a feeling of isolation as one factor associated with higher dropout rates among online students (Galusha, 1997; Kubala, 1998; Soles & Moller, 2001). Some researchers contend that psychological distance, or lack of community, in the online learning environment, can result in student isolation, frustration, boredom, overload, and low course completion rates (Hara & Kling, 2000; Northrup, 2002; Rovai, Wighting, & Liu, 2005). On the other hand, Ascough (2007), Cho, Gay, Davidson, and Ingraffea (2007), as well as Pate, Smaldino, Mayall, and Luetkehans (2009) found that creating online social communities creates an encouraging environment of shared activities that results in deeper learning, higher final course grades, and successful online courses.

Functioning in a community can enhance learning, improve academic success, and contribute to persistence in higher education (Hargis, 2005; Kember, 1987; Powers & Mitchell, 1997; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006). Yuen (2003) asserts that a learning community can help individual learners “achieve what they cannot on their own” (p. 155). Most researchers point to the instructor as the critical player in cultivating a sense of community in online courses. Rovai et al. (2005) as well as Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, and Lee (2007) found that instructors who facilitate a sense of community and student engagement significantly affect student satisfaction and quality of online learning. According to Ascough (2007) and Liu et al. (2007), a welcoming teaching and learning community is central to online student knowledge acquisition, which in turn leads to meaningful learning experiences.

Online courses create unique environments that require instructors’ thoughtful care to help students become engaged in their learning and to design virtual classrooms that enhance a sense of community (Meyers, 2008). According to Berge (2002) and Northrup (2002), when instructors carefully plan ways for students to interact, students are less likely to experience feelings of isolation and frustration and can, therefore, focus on achieving course learning goals. Students who learn the most from online courses have online instructors who provide a structured and comfortable classroom environment that involves the participation of everyone in the learning activities (Young, 2006). Oriogun, Ravenscroft, and Cook (2005) and Liu et al. (2007) posited that online student collaboration provides opportunities for students to realize their potential through meaningful engagement, which may ultimately increase student persistence rates in education. Teaching strategies that promote classroom community with free and open communication facilitate the personal engagement of students, which in turn may enhance the quality of student learning (Meyers, 2008).

Mandemach (2009) proposed that student engagement depends primarily on a number of factors, including an instructor’s personal connection with students and their creation of an active online environment. Mandemach, Gonzalez, and Garrett (2006) asserted that students’ sense of instructor presence is most influenced by teaching presence, instructor immediacy, and social presence. Teaching presence involves opportunities for frequent and effective interaction with the course instructor. Instructor immediacy refers to the behaviors that enhance closeness and interaction. O’Sullivan, Hunt, and Lippert (2004) found instructor immediacy is increased with behaviors such as initiating discussions, asking questions, using self-disclosure, addressing students by name, using inclusive personal pronouns (we, us), repeating contacts with students over time, responding frequently to students, offering praise, and communicating attentiveness. They also noted that visual cues (e.g., color, graphics, or an instructor’s picture) signal expressiveness, accessibility, engagement, and politeness. Social presence is the degree to which participants in computer-mediated communication feel affectively connected to each other. In a study examining correlates of online classroom community and student engagement, Young and Bruce (2011) identified three factors that contributed to students’ feelings of community and engagement within the course: 1) community building with the instructor, 2) community building with classmates, and 3)

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