

Chapter 21

Creating Online Community: Challenges and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

The challenges in creating a collaborative environment for online learning are great. This chapter describes some practical examples of community building in online learning contexts and discusses the effects of such activities. It draws its data from six years of online courses in English at Mid Sweden University, where the author was employed from 2003-2009 and worked with development and implementation of their Internet course program.

1. INTRODUCTION

Any teacher that can be replaced by a computer, deserves to be. (Thornburg, n.d.)

There is an increasing awareness of the special challenges posed by online education (see for example Palloff & Pratt 1999; Salmon 2002, 2004; Beetham & Sharpe 2007). While the number of Internet based courses in higher education has increased steadily over the past decades, it is also becoming increasingly clear that these “new” modes of distribution pose new challenges to instructors, students and learning institutions. For example, several studies have shown that attrition from e-learning is higher than in traditional classroom environments (Carr, 2000; Flood, 2002; Diaz, 2002; Westerberg & Mårald, 2006). While there may be several factors contributing to this tendency, one major cause is arguably that the design of online education often has been based on the same models as traditional courses, according to what Svensson (2004) calls the “you do what you did before approach”; academics see their main role as providing the contents of the course. The result has often been online learning environments that merely offer ready-made educational material to be downloaded, after which the individual is left to pursue his or her studies in relative isolation. The problem with this approach is that it disregards a

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5472-1.ch021

crucial factor – namely the social dimension of any learning experience. Online students often report feelings of isolation, and feature limited contact with instructors and fellow students. The result of this isolation can be unfinished courses or degrees (Shaw & Polovina, 1999).

The importance of social factors in deciding retention is not a new concept. As early as 1975 Tinto's Retention model postulated that whether a learner persists or drops out on a course is strongly predicted by that learner's degree of "academic and social integration." In an ordinary classroom environment, the social context for learning is something that a lecturer more or less can take for granted. Students make friends and enter networks without the interference of academic staff. Similarly, we can assume that discussions about course content and other academic questions take place outside the classroom, over coffees and snacks. As a lecturer, one is thus only providing one of the influences in the total formula making up the "learning context". The rest, however, takes care of itself and perhaps because of this, the importance of the social dimension is often underestimated. When the learning is moved to an online environment, however, this is no longer the case. I would strongly argue that it is not enough just to provide learning materials and instructions on how to use them in an online course. We also have to provide the framework for community building in our courses so that "academic and social integration" becomes possible.

There are other good reasons related to quality for the creation of community on online courses. Learning theories based on socio-cultural theories and situated learning (Vygotsky 1978; Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) have long claimed that knowledge is constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks. Similarly, in much of the current research into online learning, the social dimension is highlighted as being of primary importance. Palloff & Pratt (1999: 5), for example, maintain that the key to the learning processes in online education is "the formation of a learning community through which knowledge is imparted and meaning is co-created". Similarly, Deutschmann and Lundmark (2008) were able to show that pass rates in online language courses could be directly correlated with the amount of communication that was going on in the courses. Arguably then, creating a community in the online environment does not only affect retention, but also improves the quality of learning. The present online learning paradigm, so called Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) (Salmon, 2004), has thus involved a shift from passive learning to active student-driven participation, collaboration and dialogue between learners. Within the domain of online language education, in particular, this has become evident. According to Ciekanski and Chanier (2008: 163) there has been a shift trend from computer assisted language learning (CALL) to computer mediated communication (CMC) and computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) involving "every language skill and area" in recent years. This is also reflected in the types of software that are being developed for online learning. As Kern & Warschauer (2000:11) put it, technology usage has moved on from software that involve "learners' interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer." Online learning is thus being transformed from "silent, solitary acts to lively, meaning-making events rich in discussion" where learning takes place with others in a social context (Bonk & Cunningham 1998: 35).

In practice, however, the challenges in creating a collaborative environment for online learning are great. This chapter will describe some practical examples of community building in online learning contexts and discuss the effects of such activities. It draws its data from six years of online courses in English at Mid Sweden University, where I was employed from 2003-2009 and worked with development and implementation of their Internet course program.

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