

# Chapter 44

## Making Sense of Building Online Learning Communities

**Justina Kwapy**  
Kaplan University, USA

### ABSTRACT

*The last decade has brought an increase in online courses in the educational setting. Online enrollment has increased from 1.98 million in 2003 to 2.35 million in 2004 (Allen & Seaman, 2005). While students, higher universities, and faculty are enjoying the convenience and flexibility of online learning environments, there is an increasing concern over the support in distance education, teaching methods, and a social disconnectedness of students from the course. This chapter explores how these factors can impede a successful online learning experience and can cause dissatisfaction and higher dropout rates among students in distance learning programs. Carr (2000) found higher dropout rates for distance education (10-20%) over traditional programs. Higher institution's online faculty are now faced with the task of creating a virtual community of learners, meeting both academic and social needs of students.*

### INTRODUCTION

Online programs offer students an opportunity to further their education at their convenience, with the flexibility of learning, despite family, work and other personal obligations. Higher education faculty are no longer only required to teach in the traditional brick and mortar style, but also teach in the virtual learning environment. Teaching methods must now include building a sense of community in their classrooms that mirror those of the traditional classroom, but also giving students the connectedness and sense of belonging that make them successful, motivated, and ready to learn. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together”. It is expected that an online community establishes this connectedness of instructor and students. Community can be defined by the relationships and interactions between students and instructor. Research suggests that once a reliable technology system is in place, the design of the course and pedagogy utilized can play more of a significant role in facilitating community building than the actual

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e-learning platform (Rovai, 2002a, 2002c). Promoting interaction among community members through collaboration provides opportunities for members to learn from each other, contribute to each other's learning, and recognize and accept the differences and perspectives of each learner.

Giving instructors and students the tools to be successful in the online learning environment is essential for success. Instructors can facilitate this sense of community through careful planning, support and intentional tasks and activities that support the best practices of community building through the use of technology and a social presence that motivates and encourages student connectedness, both individually and in a group.

## **BACKGROUND**

More than four and a half million students were enrolled in at least one online course in 2009 (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Although online courses offer convenience, the social interactions found in the classroom between the professor and students continue to be an area of uneasiness due to the high attrition rates in online programs (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007). A prime concern for administrators of online degree programs and operative faculty training is an empirically-informed understanding of intentional and effective instructional practices that create meaningful, community-building interaction between students and instructors. Evidence demonstrates that a student's sense of community in an online learning environment contributes to the learner's gains, engagement and overall satisfactions with the online course.

An academic learning community is present through the connectedness of the learners and faculty. In an online learning environment, learners have little connection to the physical university. School spirit, cohesiveness and connection to the university must be demonstrated through the use of technology (Rovai, 2003). Without the sense of a learning community present, learners can experience a sense of isolation and disconnectedness from the online class and university, and ultimately, from their learning and success.

## **SOCIAL PRESENCE**

Research demonstrates that a social presence is essential in promoting student success in the online classroom (Swan & Shih, 2005). Swan & Shih suggest that social presence exists through the sharing of learners' experiences, collaboration and meaningful connections that result in an increased and effective learning experience.

The asynchronous platform that exists in the online learning environment can serve as a challenge for instructors in meeting the social needs of learners. Strategies that employ existing technology can contribute to the lack of face-to-face interactions of a traditional school. Instructors must utilize teaching methods that create a social presence in the online learning environment, and promote collaboration among the entire learning community.

Connectedness to other learners and faculty is an important characteristic of a successful learning community. Connectedness facilitates higher achievement (Rovai, 2003); however, many learners do not establish relationships with others outside of the online classroom. A study was conducted to address the perceived connectedness to other learners, faculty, the school and the university. Responses demonstrated that 68% of learners indicated some degree of connectedness to other learners and 59% indicated some

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