# Chapter XXXIV
# Self–Assessment in Building Online Communities of Learning

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## ABSTRACT

*The incorporation of self-assessment techniques and opportunities within the online learning process can enhance student learning and support the development of self-directed learners. Formative assessment (evaluation of learning in process) enables students to take ownership of their learning and to also evaluate their learning in relationship to required course goals and objectives. Formative assessment use within online learning communities works to create strong communities of practice (student learning in relationship with peers); a constructivist orientation towards learning. Accountability for learning in conjunction with peers can support and advance student learning experiences, encourage active engagement, and provide authentic experiences that advance students' understanding of their own developmental framework and the transformative nature of learning theories.*

## INTRODUCTION

How do instructors develop student ability to self-monitor and engage in online communities to promote independent learning? Through the use of an adult development model this chapter will discuss the intersection of teaching practices in online communities and learners' self-assessment.

The goal of self-assessment in online learning communities is two-fold: (a) to support student learning towards an end of increasing engaged performance on required objectives; and, (b) to advance student understanding of their development and the role that others play in influencing that development. Self-assessment enhances the transformative nature of learning theories and

skills which can lead to increased student engagement in their own and others learning.

Three dominant characteristics are necessary for creating and sustaining online learning. The first is the intentional creation of a Community of Practice (CoP) which is a group of individuals who meet around a common topic for the purpose of building the knowledge of the participants, within which dialogue supports independent learning among participants. Wenger's (2005) research suggests that a community of practice should enhance students' personal and professional experiences. A second characteristic is using online communities to provide a space for students to make sense of course content in a socially constructed way which integrates theory, personal experience and application. The third characteristic is self-assessment; how students understand themselves and their contributions to group dynamics. Self-assessment informs students of their strengths and student-identified areas for improvement which can support a deepened understanding of effective participation within online communities and enhanced student learning. Using self-assessment as a form of evaluation to gauge student performance should be done in a formative manner (during the course) rather than summative (end of course) grade. Self-assessment opportunities that are built in at various points can have a long-term impact on student participation when done throughout the on-line course rather than at the end. Self-assessment supports students to reflect on their performance and contributions and identify areas or ways to more effectively participate with peers to increase learning opportunities and mastery of course objectives.

## BACKGROUND

## Learning Communities and Social Network Theory

Hung and Nachani (2002) define a learning community as one in which students construct knowledge rather than assimilate it. For a learning community to be successful for learners, the concepts must be well scaffolded and modeled when possible. They identified four necessary components of a learning community: (1) Learning activities. The use of a variety of learning activities such as individual and group research, class discussions, cross-age tutoring, working together to create artifacts or presentations that make public both what is learned and ways of learning. An extensive use of social learning techniques in these activities is effective by getting students to co-operate and collaborate toward a common end or goal; (2) Taking ownership for one's learning. Students become responsible for their own learning and the learning of others. Students should be giving structured opportunities to develop ways to assess their own progress and work with others as a way to assess the community's progress. The teachers' role becomes one of organizing and facilitating student directed activities; (3) Students take on different roles in various activities. There is multiple ways to participate, for example, more central roles are those that contribute directly to the collective activities and knowledge of the community; and less central roles include engaging in reading notes in the knowledge base and making comments on other's notes; and 4) Discourse. This emerges through interaction with different knowledge sources and through co-construction and negotiation among members of the community. Through conversation, learners construct knowledge, filter it, discover individual differences and strive toward mutual understanding. Mutually agreed-upon concepts become community assets (p. 173).

Learning communities and communities of practice both use Vygotsky's theoretical work of to integrate aspects of how students are learning both individually and socially. One aspect of Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory is based on the idea that social interaction is vital to cognitive development. A second aspect is related to the idea that the potential for cognitive

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