Chapter 89

Fostering Effective Learning Community in the Online Classroom

Mary I. Dereshiwsky
Northern Arizona University, USA

ABSTRACT

Online learning communities are an important aspect of successful virtual learning experiences. They bring opportunities for peer collaboration and sharing of ideas in a globally based classroom unrestricted by time and space. At the same time, online learning community participants may face some challenges of effective communication and collaboration as compared to traditional face-to-face learning environments. The author discusses issues, concerns, and potential solutions with regard to online learning communities in the areas of discussion participation, group work on assignments, faculty concerns, and miscellaneous issues such as technology access. Maximizing the potential of online learning communities will facilitate higher-order learning in the technologically mediated twenty-first century classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Community is an essential part of personal and professional activities. A sense of community can enhance communications and successful attainment of goals.

Learning is no exception. By exchanging experiences and perspectives with others, our own understanding of new learning concepts is enhanced. A sense of community is therefore an important part of a classroom.

The growth in popularity of online learning can present challenges for successfully attaining this sense of online community. The relative flexibility of self-pacing, usually coupled with a lack of predetermined face-to-face meeting days and times, are admittedly a plus for busy working adults. At the same time, the online classroom can sometimes foster a sense of "a class of one" instead of a sense of teamwork with one's classmates. Can an effective sense of learning community be attained in the online classroom?

Concerns, solutions and recommendations will be explored in the following aspects of online learning communities: discussion interaction, group assignments, faculty issues and miscellaneous issues.

BACKGROUND

Let's start with the meaning of an online learning community. What is it, and why is it important? Palloff and Pratt (2007) defined online learning community as a web of learning. It consists of interactions among students themselves, interactions between students and faculty, Palloff and Pratt (2010) further identified a cycle of collaboration and community as the hallmark of a successful online learning community. Virtual learning communities are characterized by a shared purpose and reflective practice facilitated by technology. Collaboration among students and faculty enhances the sense of shared community, which further bolsters students' critical thinking and constructivism skills.

Kilgore (2016) has further linked the concept of online learning community to the idea of social presence. Such social presence, according to Kilgore, is characterized by feeling safe in expressing one's thoughts and feelings.

Now that we have defined the components of an online learning community, let's consider some of its unique aspects. What issues and concerns can arise in the attempt to build online learning community?

ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES AND PROBLEMS

Discussion Forum Participation

Many asynchronous online courses contain one or more discussion topics embedded within each learning module. The discussion topics are intended to promote student exchange of experiences and deeper understanding of the learning concepts of the course. Students are typically asked to share their own direct thoughts on each discussion topic, as well as respond to a specified number of other posts (from their classmates and/or instructor) to earn stipulated point credit for discussion participation.

These discussion forums have great potential for encouraging a sense of genuine online learning community. Students can directly reinforce and add to the perspectives of their classmates by sharing their own experiences. They can also learn to express disagreement with a classmate's position in a respectful and content-focused manner. A well-constructed discussion question also has the potential to build students' critical thinking skills. They can practice locating credible outside information to substantiate their own positions.

At the same time, such online discussions can fall flat for a number of reasons, including the following:

1. Students being reluctant to be the first one to post a response to a discussion forum. Draves (2013) has vividly referred to this issue as "no one wants to be the one to make the first footprints in the snow." As a result, instructors may see a collective "hanging back" by their students, particularly at the start of the term.
2. Students waiting until the last day of the learning module to post their own thoughts on the subject at hand. This leaves their peers with no one to respond to in order to meet their participation requirement. Instructors are likely to receive frantic "help" emails on the last day of the module: "I

Related Content

The Optimization by Using the Learning Styles in the Adaptive Hypermedia Applications
Lamia Hamzaand Guiassa Yamina Tlili (2018). *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies (pp. 16-31).*
www.irma-international.org/article/the-optimization-by-using-the-learning-styles-in-the-adaptive-hypermedia-applications/198374

Interface and Features for an Automatic 'C' Program Evaluation System
Amit Kumar Mandal, Chittaranjan Mandaland Chris Reade (2009). *Solutions and Innovations in Web-Based Technologies for Augmented Learning: Improved Platforms, Tools, and Applications (pp. 168-185).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/interface-features-automatic-program-evaluation/29647

Some Key Success Factors in Web-Based Corporate Training in Brazil: A Multiple Case Study
Luiz Antonio Joiaand Mário Figueiredo Costa (2008). *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies (pp. 1-28).*
www.irma-international.org/article/some-key-success-factors-web/3015

A Theory of the Online Teaching Experience
Sorin Walter Gudea (2008). *Expectations and Demands in Online Teaching: Practical Experiences (pp. 236-267).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/theory-online-teaching-experience/18670

Pandemic Reminders About Inclusivity and Accessibility: For Now and in the Future
Patricia Jean Crain de Galarce, Sue Cusackand Anthea Lavergne (2022). *Cases on Practical Applications for Remote, Hybrid, and Hyflex Teaching (pp. 122-138).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/pandemic-reminders-about-inclusivity-and-accessibility/300107