

Chapter 4

The Key Elements of Online Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

An online learning community can be a place for vibrant discussions and the sharing of new ideas in a medium where content constantly changes. This chapter will first examine the different definitions that researchers have provided for online learning communities. It will then illuminate several key elements that are integral to online learning communities: interactivity, in both its task-driven and socio-emotional forms; collaboration, which both builds and nurtures online communities; trusting relationships, which are developed primarily through social interaction and consist of shared goals and a sense of belonging or connectedness; and communication media choices, which impact the other three elements. This chapter also provides suggestions for the practical application of these elements in the online classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the century, the subject of the online learning community (OLC) has become a hot topic in the field of learning research. The most influential and developmental points and contributions are overviewed as follows.

Why has the OLC become more and more attractive to policy makers and researchers? Rovai (2002) suggests that the physical separation of distance

education students may be one of the contributors to high dropout rates in distance education. Hill, Raven, and Han (2002) imply that the existence of community may actually decrease dropout rates by increasing a student's sense of belonging. Community may, therefore, directly impact a student's successful completion of coursework (Brown, 2001). An OLC can maintain many of the supportive attributes of traditional instruction at a distance. Collaboration in an OLC can provide deeper understanding of content, increased overall achievement, improved self-esteem, and higher motivation

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to remain on task (Looi & Ang, 2000). For their flexibility and convenience, online courses appeal to both traditional and nontraditional students. However, many students are wary or skeptical of online courses due to factors such as isolation and lack of immediate attention. Technology in an online course is another reason community is important. Technology can cause opportunity for areas of new learning (Powers & Mitchell, 1997), and community can develop around the solving of problems or the seeking of other solutions. Additionally, quality is a concern for distance educators, and some argue that online courses do not offer the personal connections available in the regular classroom (Lowell & Persichitte, 2000). Enhanced community can provide that connection and interaction that inevitably increases quality. Essentially, the majority of the literature in the field of distance education provides support for the idea that an increased sense of community will enable meaningful learning.

Educational institutions of varying levels have undergone rapid and massive transitions in the area of distance learning (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). What began as a response to the needs of non-traditional (as well as traditional) students has proven to be an extremely desirable alternative to the regular classroom for students and an exceptionally lucrative business venture for academic institutions (Palloff and Pratt, 1999). As the number of students and instructors involved with this method of teaching and learning increase, the number of online communities to support such learning will experience dramatic growth. Therefore, it is crucial that both the online instructor and the online student are aware of the characteristics associated with an OLC. The encouragement (or requirement) of interaction among the participants in an online community is based upon many of the tenets associated with the theory of Constructivism.

This chapter reviews definitions for OLC and looks closely at the literature associated with several key elements that comprise the OLC as recognized by the authors. Key elements such as

interactivity, collaboration, trusting relationships (shared goals and belonging), and communication media in the online learning community are discussed in detail.

DEFINING THE ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

The term community is used very broadly and partly also with more or less different meanings. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines community as “a unified body of individuals” (Merriam-Webster, 2004). However, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) define community specifically as “a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it” (p.4). Conversely, McMillan and Chavis (1986) offer this description of community: “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Still other aspects of community are addressed by Westheimer and Kahne’s (1993) explanation, which describes community as “a process marked by interaction and deliberation among individuals who share interests and commitment to common goals” (p.325). Tu and Corry (2002) address the academic and social-learning component of communities and define a learning community as “a common place where people learn using group activity to define problems affecting them, to decide upon solutions, and to act together to achieve these solutions” (p. 207). However, when examining online learning communities additional criteria must be considered. Fernback (1997) describes community as “a term which seems readily definable to the general public but is infinitely complex and amorphous in academic discourse” (p. 35). This explanation seems especially accurate when referring to the

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