

## Chapter 13

# Meaningful Connections: “Going the Distance” in Distance Learning Through the Design and Generation of Community Building Online Learning Interactions

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the importance of collaborative and authentic learning in online distance learning environments. It focuses upon the interactive activities between the instructor, learners, online environment, and larger community, which are all engaged towards developing a community of learners in which meaningful connections enhance learner motivation (Ardichvili, Page & Wentling, 2003; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004) and acquisition of learning objectives. Built-in opportunities are integral to the process for socialization-type learning activities and instructor’s awareness, and alignment of those activities to the readiness of individual learners and collective learning community (i.e., zone of proximal development) (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Practical instructional ideas and activities for building an online learning community are presented.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Imagine yourself as a first-time traveler on a train tour across a foreign country-side.

As a novice tourist, with limited knowledge of the native language, you make your way towards the train station and purchase your ticket. As you anxiously peer down the tracks for signs of the train that will transport you across an unfamiliar countryside to exciting new experiences, you study other passengers waiting on the train platform who are also gazing longingly for the train to pull into the station. At last, the train arrives and the conductor steps onto the platform preparing to check tickets and the tour guide greets you with maps and brochures. As each person boards, you notice other hopeful travelers with dreams of adventure on this shared journey. Although apprehensive about the journey about to begin, the excitement for the voyage, as well as the eagerness to meet these new passengers, you quickly quell any misgivings for making the trip.

As the researchers began collecting and organizing the data for this chapter, a metaphor of a journey began to develop. A journey of hopeful anticipation, adventure and the realization of new insights through experience of different landscapes and environments began to emerge. More explicitly, a train-based journey presented itself as a visible representation of the course experience and was integrated to support and enhance the reader's understanding related to developing communities of learning (Gannon Cook & Crawford, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Swan, 2005) and communities of practice (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Wenger, McDermont, & Snyder, 2002) within the online learning environment. Online learning interactions, as well as other types of interactive activities (Bonk, Wisher, & Nigrelli, 2004; Haythornwaite, 2006) support and positively model the importance of meaningful connections within the learning environment. Although these types of community building activities may integrate into the face-to-face learning environment more easily,

it is of vital importance to not only design online learning interactions within the course framework, but also to model the importance of meaningful connections that engage the learner and support the development of higher order thinking skills (Bloom 1956, 1971; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The researchers were inspired to integrate this metaphor as a conceptual underpinning to enhance and aid in the overall discussions related to how one might create a more interactive online environment for e-learners. The metaphor commences at the station while the passengers eagerly await the train's arrival on the station platform. Prior to the conductor emerging from the train ready to collect tickets, an initial inspection of the train's mechanical system, as well as a sweep of all cabins, has been performed, and a check of the train's destination including a report on possible track derailments was conducted. The train represents the virtual community of learning (online course environment and environmental usability, if you will), the train track that the train follows represents the course content, the train's conductor is the facilitative online instructor, and the passengers are the students, the eventual members of the community (all from different backgrounds, with varying experiences and different perceptions of ultimate destination). The journey that the passengers will undertake symbolizes the knowledge or learning that will take place within the distance learning course environment. To sum, the following designations have been offered:

- *First-time traveler, novice tourist* = individual online learner
- *Passengers* = community of online learners
- *Train* = virtual community of learning within the course environment
- *Station* = virtual gathering place to "get on the train"
- *Conductor and Tour Guide* = facilitative online instructor
- *Train engineer* = instructional designer
- *Journey* = knowledge or learning to occur

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