

# Choosing Online Learning Communities or Collaborative Learning

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## INTRODUCTION

The adoption and innovative use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology can have positive outcomes for regional development (Ashford, 1999; Harris, 1999; Mitchell, 2003). Especially when it involves the use of online environments, CMC can lead to what Gillespie, Richardson, and Cornford (2001) refer to as the “death of distance,” and is likely to boost opportunities for growth in e-commerce, e-business, and e-learning in the regions. Although such growth depends on continuous learning and innovation (Rainnie, 2002), actual opportunities for learning and training can be affected by approaches to the provision of online learning that are unnecessarily rigid and inflexible. Online education and training methods that include strict participation requirements can have the effect of marginalizing and excluding those learners who cannot engage with inflexible and regimented learning contexts. This represents an important problem in regions, because of limited access to other learning contexts.

This article focuses on one major reason given by educators who employ mandatory learner participation in online learning contexts: the notion that individuals learn more effectively when they become members of online “communities.” We critique this notion, and we hold that the concept of “community” is more of an ideological, rather than a practical, one. Indeed, it is hard to see how effective online learning must require membership to an online community, and it becomes even more unclear how mandatory online participation and interaction promotes learning. In the event, the notion of a “community of learners” is awkward when attempting to describe an online learning environment that facilitates (rather than mandates) participation and interactivity. Rather, when participation takes place on learners’ own terms, then we might describe the learning context as a collaborative online learning environment.

## WHY “COMMUNITY”?

New technologies enable innovative approaches to teaching and learning and also provide means through which learners might be empowered to control and direct the processes through which they learn. It is even predicted that traditional distance education will all but disappear and will be replaced by “distributed learning,” or flexible learning (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2001). Online learning assumes a degree of participation through CMC in activities that require electronic text writing and reading, online research, online assessment tasks, and sometimes the use of visual learning aids such as digital objects. The advantages that can be offered by online learning environments (OLEs) are numerous and include flexible participation, unlimited access to resources, and means to personalize online presence (see also Kessop, 2003; Morse, 2003).

The idea of online learning “communities” tends to accompany notions of what an online learning environment should be, and often “participation” by learners in online communities is taken to be necessary. In practice, these translate to specific interactivity and participation requirements being imposed on students, who are often required to participate in structured and controlled online learning platforms and systems. This appears to generally be the result of an unreflective (taken-for-granted) notion that it is a sense of community that helps create an environment that facilitates learning. This notion can be found in routine, but often-unsubstantiated statements within the literature. For example, in discussing advantages of asynchronous communication, Carr-Chellman and Duchastel (2001) stated: “Such dialogues lead to the formation of true learning communities, within which adult students share their real world experiences and learning outcomes, thereby profiting all participants ...” (p. 153). The problem lays in defining a “true learning community” and why there must be a community in order for learners to share their real-world experiences online.

The activity of learning may be described as a process of becoming part of a community of knowledge (McPherson, Nunes, & Harris, 2002: online), which is not the same as a “community of learners.” The latter can be taken to mean a group of learners with a shared purpose, good means of communication, and a “climate” that facilitates justice, discipline, and caring (Brown, 2001). However, it should be noted that mandating the construction of an online community is not necessarily the same as understanding that learners are capable of learning, collaborating, and creating structure (even community) for themselves. For example, “Discussions become active and productive when students themselves identify a real task of direct benefit to them” (Zimmer, Harris, & Muirhead, 2001, pp. 3.6–3.7).

However, although learner interaction may be required when there is value-laden information to be shared in the online learning context, it is hardly necessary when highly structured and consensual information is delivered (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2001, p. 155). Further, in an online learning environment, there are two types of interaction: interaction with the information available, and interaction with the social setting involved. The level of interaction with the social setting is influenced by the learner’s level of interest to interact (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2001, p. 155). Another way to define interaction is through “Moore’s Theory,” in which three dimensions of interaction are identified: learner-to-instructor, learner-to-content, and learner-to-learner (Huang, 2002, p. 407; Curtis & Lawson, 2001, p. 23). The point is that effective interaction does not require the existence of “community.”

## Participation

“Participation” is an important concept in online education but has two different meanings. The first, which we label *normal participation*, refers to interaction with other learners and the online platform on the learner’s own terms. The learner may or may not choose to communicate with other learners, and interacts with the OLE when he or she deems it necessary. Normal participation does not mean that there are no rules to be followed, such as communicating with instructors at specific points in the course, or fulfilling particular assessment-related tasks individually or with other learners. Normal participation refers to learner-controlled processes.

The second meaning of participation in online learning contexts refers to required interaction with other learners and with the OLE beyond the need of the learner to do so. Often, the formal outcome for learners is conditional on this type of participation, which we label *mandatory participation*. The learner cannot choose a level

of participation in the online course, and often has little control over the learning environment. Invariably, educators that employ mandated participation also use a limiting and uninspiring OLE, in which participants cannot do more than perhaps exchange text messages in synchronous and asynchronous online forums, search for resources, or complete online quizzes.

## What is this Thing Called “Community”?

Typically, an online “community of learners” is defined as a set of online relationships that result from social interaction and that also promote learning. For example, Nichani observed that:

*One aspect that characterizes communities is the nature of the social interactions between members of the community. People form communities to pursue shared goals or ideals. In the act of pursuing these goals and ideals, they form relationships. It is the nature of the social interactions through these relationships that sustains the community, or in the case of a community of learners, sustains learning.* (Nichani, 2000, p. 2)

Sometimes educators find that their online courses develops into “intimate communities of learners”, in which “... it is common for participants in online courses to develop a strong sense of community that enhances the learning process” (Kessop, 2003: online). However, there remains a lack of more consistent evidence that such communities develop routinely. Online communities are not easily achieved, not least because many learners prefer to be recluses rather than participate in online community-building activities. Nichani (2000) reports studies that describe reluctance by learners and even educators to participate regularly and enthusiastically in online activities. For example, a series of four studies found that in online courses at a U.S. university,

*... an overwhelming majority of students never posted messages on newsgroups, nor did their instructors. In addition, a large majority of students rarely read what others had posted* (Nichani, 2000, p. 2)

It is worth digressing briefly to consider the social complexity encompassed by the term “community” when used from a scholarly perspective, which stands in contrast to how it is often used in online learning contexts. Indeed, almost half a century ago, a sociologist found no less than 96 definitions for community (Hillery, 1955). There have been many more explanations offered since, but Etzioni’s is perhaps the most popular:

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