

# Community in the Online Environment

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## INTRODUCTION

Students enrolled in a face-to-face classroom have the opportunity to interact with their peers and develop a sense of community, feelings of belonging, and connectedness. However, students taking courses accessed through the Internet, while they do have classmates, generally cannot see the other students and usually do not interact synchronously with these individuals because the flexibility of both time and location allow for differences in course access. This lack of face-to-face synchronous interaction with other students enrolled in online classes has led to concern about online education because of the social nature of learning.

To facilitate the social nature of learning, instructors in the online environment may design classes that engage students and promote the building of community among the students enrolled in the course. Those instructors who perceive that social learning is important will, therefore, encourage students to build the connections that lead to a sense of community and a successful online learning experience.

## BACKGROUND

The number of students involved in online coursework is growing for both post-secondary and secondary education (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2006). However, in an online classroom, students lack the face-to-face interaction necessary for developing the sense of community and camaraderie that highlight the social nature of learning. Without this face-to-face interaction, developing community can be a challenging task (Poe & Stassen, 2005). For students to feel part of a class and to develop a sense of community that will lead to feelings of belonging, acceptance, and trust in classmates who cannot be heard or seen is difficult.

The value of social connections/relationships can be found in literature from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which spelled out the importance of social relationships by placing social groups and relationships

as important needs (Rathus, 1996) to learner-centered education, which puts the focus on learners rather than the instructor. Although the concept of learner-centered education has been around for centuries, the concept was not readily accepted in the beginning.

The one name that nearly every educator knows is John Dewey (1859-1952), who dramatically influenced education throughout his adult life. Dewey believed in the value of experience, with the learner at the center of a series of events. He believed "that the only way a child would develop to its [*sic*] potential was in a social setting" (Henson, 2003, p. 9). Dewey's view of learner-centered education was that education "was problem-based and fun" (Henson, 2003, p. 10). When looking at the social nature of learning, Gentry, Rizza, Peters, and Hu (2005) found the "social nature of learning has been widely acknowledged (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Lave & Wenger, 1991), thus creating appropriate social learning environments that foster learning . . . is a desirable goal" (Background, ¶ 5).

Two modern-day educational theories, Constructivism and Cognition, both support the social values of learning. An educational writer who (along with Dewey) strongly supported the value of social interactions to learning was Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1896-1934) studied interactions and found students were able to "talk each other through to solutions . . . and collectively solve problems more efficiently than they could solve them when working alone" (Henson, 2003, p. 13). The Constructivism theory is identified by a number of characteristics of which one is the value of social support and refers to the interacting with others when "explaining, defending, discussing, and assessing" ideas (Sherman & Kurshan, 2005, p. 12).

Cognition theorists, as well as constructivists, point out that understanding does not happen in isolation. Interactions with others and the "cognitive tools that support interactions" contribute to the knowledge that individuals acquire (Swan & Shea, 2005, p. 241). Swan and Shea (2005) noted that individuals have a need to relate to each other so they can look for the shared interests and work to develop trust and feelings of

belonging within the social environment that will lead to increased learning at the academic level. For them virtual learning communities should provide this social support. Once the feelings of trust and commitment have been established, then the students can translate community into benefits for the learning experience.

### COMMUNITY IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Is community an important part of learning? Research, for the most part, supports the importance of community in learning.

#### Community

Understanding how community relates to learning begins with first understanding why community is important to individuals and the relationship to cooperative learning. J. C. Moore (2005) lists five principles for defining quality education—learning effectiveness, access, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, and cost effectiveness. According to Moore, learning effectiveness, among other factors, should include interaction with communication and community building emphasized. Students can then be active participants in their learning environment as they collect and reflect on information in a variety of ways.

Likewise, Palloff and Pratt (1999) designed a Distance Learning Framework (p. 74) puzzle with community at the center. Around the edges of the center puzzle piece are: 1) faculty guidance providing teamwork with mutually negotiated guidelines, 2) facilitation with collaborative learning; 3) interaction and feedback promoting active creation of knowledge and meaning, and 4) buy-in from everyone with focused outcomes and shared goals (p. 74).

#### Sense of Community

Individuals, therefore, have a need to relate to each other so they can look for the shared interests and work to develop trust and feelings of belonging within the social environment that will lead to increased learning at the academic level. Sense of community is the student's perception or sense of how connected he or she feels about the social environment of the online classroom (Kyröläinen, 2001). Several methods have been used

to measure this feeling of connectedness or belonging, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Rovai (2002) developed a classroom community scale to measure a student's sense of community in the classroom. This scale consists of two subscales, connectedness and learning. Other measures found included *The Sociability Scale* (Kreijns, Kirchner, Jochems, & van Buuren, 2005), Janosik's (1991) *The Campus Community Scale* used by Cheng (2004), researcher-developed questionnaires, and qualitative interviews.

Three researchers who investigated community had very similar results. Kyröläinen (2001) investigated sense of community in a Web-based environment and found four factors in sense of community that correspond with the literature: "1) reciprocal involvement, 2) basic trust for others, 3) common purpose and similarity of members, and 4) shared history" (p. 18). Wegerif (1998) concluded that "course design, the role of the moderators, the interaction styles of course participants and features of the technological medium used" contributed to students moving from feelings of isolation to feelings of belonging (p. 48). Cheng (2004) investigated community with on-campus students and concluded that community "involves faculty and students on a common dedication to teaching and learning (p. 228). The students in his study did not want to feel like a number and being accepted and cared about as part of a community led to feelings of belonging.

Students both in this author's dissertation research and in her online classroom confirmed that community played an important role in the online learning environment. Students related that sharing diverse views helped to broaden one's outlook and stimulated thinking as well as contributed to understanding. The major issue with sense of community, though, is whether or it contributes to learning. In fact, 74% of the students who were interviewed for the dissertation study expressed that community was important and did contribute to their learning (Lear, 2007).

Today learners are active, wired, and use technology to stay connected to Web, friends, professors, and maybe even family. Just as in the face-to-face classroom, individual online classes take on a personality of their own because the students bring a variety of experiences to the class discussion. Students have to develop a comfort level that allows for participation and sharing.

In addition to student factors, course factors as well as instructor factors may influence the building of

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