Online Learning Community

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INTRODUCTION

The study and implementation of online learning communities emerges from two approaches related to the idea of "community." The first approach was how people began to think about learning community, but not restricted to online settings. Learning community incorporates the idea of a cohesive, collaborative culture among members with the purpose of supporting individual learning by facilitating shared knowledge creation. The idea of a learning community, and its importance for improving learning, pre-dated most online learning, and the focus was on building communities to support learning regardless of setting.

The second approach was that people began to inquire whether it was possible to build community online, but not for purposes restricted to learning. The idea that true community was possible via computer-mediated communication (CMC) was, and still is, contentious. However, as the years have passed since this question first emerged, the idea that community can be formed online has been increasingly accepted.

These two related trajectories bring us to where we are today with respect to online learning community. As the first graphical web browsers facilitated hypertext and graphical access to the Internet, and more people started using the web for a variety of interpersonal and learning activities, online community and online learning became more common. Not unexpectedly, educators and researchers soon began to wonder if it was possible to create online learning communities.

BACKGROUND

The first step in understanding how learning communities could be developed online was to establish that the online environment could appropriately support the social dimensions and outcomes of learning (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995; Hiltz & Wellman, 1997; Wegerif, 1998). Once these baseline claims were supported, attention could turn to the processes of building and maintaining community within online learning. It was important to understand the process of community building in online learning, and also to begin to figure out how to support it socially and pedagogically in online settings (Hiltz 1998; Palloff & Pratt 1999; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins & Shoemaker 2000; Renninger & Shumar 2002; Rovai 2002; Swan 2002; Palloff & Pratt 2007).

Once a greater understanding was developed about how online learning communities could be created and supported, the time was also ripe for re-examining the technological design of learning systems. The interactions of system design, pedagogy and community had to be explored so we could better understand how to design learning systems to support community and pedagogy simultaneously, and also how to let the needs of learning communities inform modifications to learning systems (Preece, 2000; Bruckman, 2004; Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004). At the same time, attention also shifted from understanding how to build online learning communities to how to assess their success and effectiveness (Harasim 2002; Hiltz & Turoff 2002).

More recently, researchers and educators have begun exploring various models and methods of online learning (Haythornthwaite et al, 2007); instead of addressing online learning and its communities as uniform activities, the literature begins to tease out how online learning community works differently when different pedagogical methods, educational levels, and delivery modes are used (Lim, Morris, & Kupritz, 2007; Twigg 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Bruckman, 2002; Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2004). This trend acknowledges the shift over time from online learning as primarily asynchronous to combinations of synchronous and asynchronous delivery, and to combinations of online and face-to-face modes such as hybrid or blended learning.

ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY: PROCESSES

The approach taken in this article to understanding online learning communities is to examine the processes associated with such communities (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins & Shoemaker, 2000). The following four sections discuss the processes of forming the community; maintaining the community; making connections beyond the online learning community; and disengaging from the community.

Forming Online Learning Communities

The formation of online learning communities can be supported by educators in a variety of ways, and should be begun early in the learning trajectory so students feel connected and supported. The first step is to provide information and to facilitate formal and informal interaction, for both task-oriented and social purposes. Students need to be given information about the technology they will use, examples of its use, training in how to use the technology, and hands-on experience with the technology in a low-stakes situation that is not tied to an official course grade. This information, training, and practice needs to include interaction with other learners so that students immediately have an understanding that technology is a tool to support learning and interaction together. To that end, the administrators, instructors, and faculty who interact with students from their very early contact with the educational institution need to model a culture of community that is supported by technology. Incoming students who see that the members of the institution engage in prosocial, community-supportive behavior also see that there is a community they can join and to which they can contribute (Sproull, Conley, & Moon, 2005).

One way to help students form an online learning community is through cohorts. A cohort has generally been thought of as a group of students who begin a program together, take all their classes together, and finish at the same time. This model is very successful; because the students share so many common experiences, they bond as a community. However, there are ways to group students together other than the timing of when they chose to begin learning online. Groups can be developed geographically. One way to do this is to provide online interactive spaces for students in specific shared geographic locations. In that scheme, students also may have the option to meet face-to-face at their home locale, but students who do not have any fellow students nearby can end up excluded from a sense of online community altogether. If students are spread geographically, leaving a lot of potentially isolated individuals, another way to group students to facilitate community is by interest. These can be closely tied to the educational purpose (e.g., by major, specialization, area of interest, certification being earned) or they can be somewhat separate from the educational purpose (type of workplace, rural or urban setting, age, or outside hobbies). Creating cohorts this way uses the technology to support true online learning communities that would be impossible given the constraints of physical location.

On the other hand, face-to-face meetings are very useful in forming online learning community. Community *can* certainly be formed online without face-to-face meetings, but when they are viable for the student population and educational institution, they are valuable. A shared orientation or other initial meeting allows students to share the most stressful time of their online education – the beginning – in close proximity to one another and lets them build relationships that will last through online interactions in various media.

Maintaining Online Learning Communities

Many of the factors that go into creating an online learning community continue to be needed throughout its lifecycle, because infrastructural support is key to helping students maintain their online learning community. Structured opportunities for interaction among students need to be offered, for formal task interaction about coursework, for informal task interaction, and for social interaction. Examples include allowing students to use interaction technologies that support video, voice, desktop sharing and whiteboard functions during non-class times; and providing platforms in their usual learning-related technology environments for non-task interactions. Another good way to support online community, if it is possible, is to have periodic face-to-face meetings; even once per semester allows students to rekindle their relationships. If face-to-face meetings are not possible, however, community can still be maintained via online-only means, but the need for interaction *outside* the usual classes becomes even keener.

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