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Building Community in Self-Paced Online Courses

Editor's note: Developing a learning community is a common theme in Online Classroom. In this issue we look at community development in two extremes of the online learning environment: in self-paced courses and in courses that use synchronous sessions extensively. Both environments have limitations, and critics can find shortcomings in each. We hope that the techniques and examples of these two different environments will cause you to rethink these often-overlooked learning environments.

Geoffrey Rubinstein, acting director of the Independent Learning Division of Continuing Education and Professional Studies at the University of Colorado-Boulder, is challenging the conventional notion of community in online learning by exploring ways of building community in self-paced online courses.

"Communities don't spontaneously appear in August and spontaneously disappear in December," Rubinstein says. "So much of the perceived deficit of community in self-paced courses comes from the idea that the students need to be on the same page at the same time to create community. I challenge that as the default notion, and I am experimenting with the idea that

there are all kinds of other ways to introduce community into the self-paced setting."

Rubinstein models online learning communities on the communities of interest that appear on the Web outside formal academic settings. "The kinds of participation in an authentic community of interest that's not structured by an academic setting are very much like what I would imagine happening in a self-paced course," Rubinstein says. "I try to get away from the idea that having students all on the same page at the same time is the only way to construct community."

Not all online courses can work as self-paced courses, particularly those that depend on peer feedback on assignments, but for courses that can be self-paced, there are several ways of developing community. Some of the community-building techniques used in self-paced courses can be used in term-based courses as well.

One way to create a sense of community is to have students join professional communities of interest that are related to the discipline and report back to others in the online course. The student who joins the professional community of interest can become a member of

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TIPS FROM THE PROS

Understand Pedagogy and Yourself Before Teaching Online

Understanding how to use the technology to deliver an online course is an important step in becoming an online instructor, but before learning the technology, it's essential to have a good understanding of pedagogy and your suitability for the online classroom.

The problem is that many instructors who have gone into the teaching profession have reached this stage by being a content expert, not necessarily an expert in pedagogy. In addition, teaching in a new environment is perhaps more difficult than teaching in a familiar one because even without much teaching experience, an instructor is able to draw on years of experience as a student. But that experience does not translate as easily to the online environment.

Charles R. Harris, an educational leadership doctoral student at Arkansas State University and former instructional design coordinator at Troy State University, recommends learning about pedagogy and that before you get

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Measuring Online Community

What factors contribute to an online learning community, and how can they be measured? These questions are at the heart of a survey of 709 students from 63 courses at three universities over an 18-month period conducted by David DiRamio, assistant professor of education at Auburn University.

Based on analysis of quantitative and qualitative survey data, DiRamio identified the following factors that affect community and their associated indicators:

• **Instructor's role** – the way the

course is organized, including course expectations, virtual classroom rules, and instructor duties.

Indicators:

1. Instructor took the role of mentor, guiding students through the course.
2. Instructor shared ways of thinking about problems and problem-solving with students.
3. "Do's-and-don'ts" for the class were provided.
4. Instructor looked for course concepts and course-specific vocabulary when grading student writing assignments.
5. Instructor encouraged students to share their ideas and experiences.

• **Connections** – participation and familiarity: helping other students, group work, taking the lead, student interaction. Indicators:

1. Student had the opportunity to work in a group on a project or task.
2. Student had the chance to help other students.
3. Student took a leadership role in some task or event related to the course.
4. Interaction between students was important.

• **Student's responsibility**–

Motivation and maturity: students accountable for own learning, empowered to learn in a manner that works best for them.

Indicators:

1. It was important to be self-motivated.
2. The ability to organize and prioritize was vital.
3. Student needed to manage time effectively.
4. Student was responsible for own learning.

Instructor's role

One of the keys to building engagement is for the instructor to share information about his or her professional life and problem-solving methods, DiRamio says. "I suspect many teachers do that in the regular classroom without thinking, but somehow, when they move into the virtual classroom, some of these traditional pedagogical techniques that come as second nature are lost maybe because of what is perceived as the impersonal framework in which we teach in virtual learning. I want that back in there because students are asking for it, and it seems to be an important ingredient for building community.

"That seems to lead to sharing among the students, and that's the goal here because the virtual learning community is so dependent on students working together rather than the traditional model of the faculty member being the disseminator of all information."

Connections

"In virtual learning, where opportunities to connect and stay engaged are limited, it is important that instructors design in opportunities for students to help each other. I think

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Creating Trust in Online Courses

In order to have a productive learning environment, the instructor needs to develop and maintain a sense of trust between and among the students and the instructor through good course design and facilitation, says Nancy Coppola, associate professor of humanities at New Jersey Institute of Technology.

In a study that looked at developing trust in virtual teams, Coppola and her colleagues built on the work of Meyerson, et al. that looked at “swift trust,” “a unique form of collective perception ... for temporary, but not trivial, situations.” For the purpose of the study Coppola and her colleagues used these previous researchers’ definition of swift trust, which frames trust in temporary situations in terms of the following characteristics:

- **vulnerability** – the belief (hope) that others will care for what is being entrusted with good will.
- **uncertainty** – a willingness to suspend doubt in order to execute the task performance.
- **risk** – a willingness to take risks
- **expectations** – a positive expectation of benefits of temporary group activity.

To determine the effects of trust in online learning, Coppola and her colleagues identified the most effective teacher from among those they had studied based on 1,300 post-course questionnaires that rated instructor effectiveness. For comparison, they also selected an instructor who was ranked among the least effective.

The researchers coded the online discussion transcripts in each course and analyzed them for social emotional positive and negative responses to students. Based on their analysis they found that com-

munication plays an essential role in developing trust in virtual teams and developed the following trust-building strategies:

- **Establish early communication.** Students need to perceive the instructor’s presence as soon as the course begins.
- **Develop a positive social atmosphere.** Team members are going to respond to the caring that they perceive in the instructional environment and the way that instruc-

“No matter how short or long the online course is going to be, the instructor needs to be there first and to provide constant, regular feedback.”

tors do this is by modeling solidarity, congeniality, and affiliation. “We found that when students followed that model, there was evidence of the establishment of trust,” Coppola says.

- **Reinforce predictable patterns of communication and action.** Students need structured activity, repetition, and feedback. Without these, the students will get the impression that the instructor does not care about the course or the students, making development of trust unlikely.
- **Involve team members in tasks** such as group projects or activities that require students to rely on each other to complete them. To get students to participate fully, participation should be required and the instructor should maintain a presence and motivate the students.

“No matter how short or long the online course is going to be, the

instructor needs to be there first and to provide constant, regular feedback. You need to get in there quickly in the beginning and get trust going and make sure the trust is carried through with these meaningful group tasks,” Coppola says.

An important role the instructor plays is modeling. “Students take their cues from the instructor, and when the instructor is not there, the students will be negative. But if the instructor is positive from the beginning, showing emotion for the students and the content, students will respond in the same way,” Coppola says.

Course design can have an impact as well. “Certainly, the environment should be designed to facilitate conversation.

Communication is the single most important aspect of a successful online environment. The course needs to be designed with the most opportunities for communication between and among the students and the instructor and the opportunity for students to give feedback to one another,” Coppola says.

These strategies can encourage trust, but the instructor needs to closely monitor communication in the course and take corrective action when necessary. Coppola recommends asking the following questions to gauge trust:

- Are students responding positively to one another?
- Are the students responding frequently?
- Are the students really thinking and engaging with the material and one another?

The answers to these questions can vary throughout the duration of

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Interactive Syllabus Improves Course Accessibility

As part of an Educational Quality Through Universal Design Principles (EQUIP) grant, Marge Mercurio and Laurie MacDonald, instructional designers at the University of Northern Colorado, asked UNC and Ames Community College students in focus groups what types of support would improve the learning experience. They got many answers, but the following three items were most common:

- course information before the course begins -- This is important for students with disabilities who may need accommodations such as finding Braille or audio versions of textbooks as well as for students wanting to know if they are interested in the course or in how much time the course will require.
- course notes or an outline of what the course will cover
- student-faculty communication — Students said they wanted an easy way to contact the instructor to ask questions that are not included in the syllabus.

Based on this information, Mercurio and MacDonald developed the concept for an interactive syllabus, an online document that

- contains all the relevant course information, including internal and external hyperlinks
- can be easily updated
- provides a means of communication between the students and the instructor.

Mercurio and MacDonald have worked with faculty on the campus and at workshops around the country to help them develop interactive syllabi, using Microsoft Word. With

basic Word skills and the ability to create internal and external hyperlinks, instructors can create syllabi that provide students with current course information that can serve as a portal for the course.

Once the syllabus is created in Word it can be uploaded to a course website. When it is time to edit it, the changes can be made in Word and the updated document can be

“It’s one thing to have a link in a book, but if you have it on the syllabus, it’s more likely that the students are going to go there and view the material.”

uploaded to the course website.

The complexity of an interactive syllabus can vary according to the instructor’s preferences and the students’ needs but generally includes:

- institution’s name
- class title and section
- number of credits
- room location (if it’s an on-campus course)
- instructor’s name
- instructor’s e-mail
- office hours
- prerequisites
- textbook
- grading policy
- goals
- objectives
- assignments
- disability access links
- links to honor code, plagiarism statement
- final exam date/time/location
- hardware/software specifications

All of the elements above are generally what one would expect to

see on a paper syllabus. The interactive syllabus is different in format rather than content. “It’s more compact,” MacDonald says. “Instead of putting the plagiarism policy on the syllabus, you can put a link to the university’s site, and as the university makes policy changes, the syllabus stays current without having to retype the new policies on the syllabus.”

In helping instructors develop their interactive syllabi, Mercurio and MacDonald give them free reign to include whatever elements they find useful. These can include:

- publisher websites
- information for organizations/affiliations to course or program information
- reference materials for weekly discussion areas
- classical research
- graphics
- sound bites
- video clips
- photographs or slides

“Our goal is getting students with disabilities to be more successful in class, and this came out of the universal design principle that it’s easier for students with disabilities, it’s easier for everybody in the class, so everybody benefits,” MacDonald says.

Although the information in the interactive syllabus is essentially the same as what might be found in a traditional syllabus, the links make the interactive syllabus more accessible. “It’s one thing to have a link in a book, but if you have it on the syllabus, it’s more likely that the students are going to go there and view the material,” Mercurio says.

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COURSE DESIGN

Using Synchronous Communication to Deliver Online Lectures, Create Community

Because synchronous online communication can be inconvenient for online learners, many instructors avoid using it for anything beyond optional online office hours or small-group collaboration. But by doing so, they are forgoing the sense of presence and community it can create.

In Mary Brady's courses, synchronous communication plays more than a peripheral role. Brady, professor of education at Wayne State University in Michigan, uses it to deliver content and interact with students, and students spend up to one-quarter of their time in the course communicating synchronously.

Brady uses Blackboard's Virtual Classroom for synchronous presentation and chat. Since it does not support PowerPoint or video, she uses Web-based graphics and tables and text to deliver lectures – usually four or five times a semester in groups of four to six.

Before the course starts, Brady sends each student a link to a sign-up sheet that lists the days and times for each synchronous session. The students sign up for times that best suit their schedules, which helps create diverse groups. Brady conducts synchronous sessions on the same material several times on a designated night, usually between 45 minutes and one hour for each group.

Brady prepares her lectures before these synchronous sessions and saves them as HTML and transfers them to Virtual Classroom using FTP (File Transfer Protocol) so she has easy access to her lecture notes and graphics during the synchronous sessions.

As different questions come up during the lecture, Brady has sever-

al windows open that she can easily place on the whiteboard. She also has a sheet that contains all the course's URLs, which she uses to direct students to specific materials on the course site as needed.

The materials are divided into small sections of discrete materials

“The students see your presence in the asynchronous environment via responses to their discussion board postings and feedback, but in the Virtual Classroom (synchronous), they feel a true classroom environment and sense of group.”

that consist of between two and eight sentences each. Typing the URL helps prevent the need for students to search through the course to find the sections that answer their questions and also minimizes the need for them to take notes. Once the URL is typed, it also appears in the archive of the session for future reference.

Being able to send students the exact information they need when they need it requires a thorough familiarity with the content and the course layout. “If I'm teaching students about writing behavior objectives, and they ask, ‘What word can I use so the behavior objective is written so it is measurable?’, if I know my content, I know where to direct them. Rather than having to type that information, I can click on a link or send them a well-written behavior objective that I either scanned or FTPed over. I have a lot

of information I can immediately put on the whiteboard,” Brady says.

All of this preparation minimizes the typing and the time students have to wait before getting a response, which is one of the shortcomings of using the keyboard as the primary synchronous interface.

After the lecture portion of each synchronous session, Brady logs off to conduct a synchronous session for the next group. While the group is together they have the opportunity to work on their group projects. (Students have four Web activities and a Web-based midterm the complete as a group.)

Brady does not use synchronous sessions to put her students on the spot. Instead, her main rationale is to create community through small-group interaction. “The small group (cohort) becomes cohesive,” Brady says. “This type of instruction delivery seems to break down most inhibitions that some students have in the face-to-face or large-class, live setting.”

In addition to working collaboratively with other students and building community within the groups, synchronous communication increases the students' sense of the instructor's presence. “You are really there in the synchronous environment. The students see your presence in the asynchronous environment via responses to their discussion board postings and feedback, but in the Virtual Classroom (synchronous), they feel a true classroom environment and sense of group,” Brady says.

Contact Mary Brady at mary.brady@wayne.edu. @

some instructors are not aware that they need to set the stage for these things to occur,” DiRamio says.

An interesting finding of this study under the category of connections was that students ranked group work as the fifth most important factor (out of eight) for their online courses while instructors consistently rank it as the absolute last principle that is applicable for their courses. “Students said [group projects] were tough but good so I encourage faculty to include group work in their online courses. My study shows it builds engagement in online courses,” DiRamio says.

Student’s responsibility

DiRamio says online learning requires more student responsibility than in face-to-face courses, and the instructor needs to make this point clear at the outset. One instructor developed an online learning contract that students are required to initial before proceeding. It explains that the student needs to be self-motivated, prepared to put in scheduled time each week to visit the course site and look at new materials, respond to other student postings, and take a greater responsibility for initiating communication with the instructor.

Implications for course design

From analyzing the data from this study, DiRamio offers the following course design advice:

- Design courses so that the instructor is more of a mentor and guide than a disseminator of information.
- Do not micromanage. “While it’s critical that the instructor set up the scaffolding that encourages students to take on the role of helping each other and working together to get through the course content and learn the model that I’m seeing in

my research – whether it’s the discussion boards, chat, streaming video or other technologies – is that the instructor should let go of some of the micromanaging of the course and let the students work together to find their way,” DiRamio says.

- Use learning contracts. “I think the idea of learning contracts to start the course is something that is very practical that sounds corny at first, but if you set it up in a clear way that’s interesting, especially using all the features of the Web, it sets the tone early on,” DiRamio says.

“In virtual learning, where opportunities to connect and stay engaged are limited, it is important that instructors design in opportunities for students to help each other. I think some instructors are not aware that they need to set the stage for these things to occur.”

- Provide opportunities for students to take leadership roles. This can include reviewing someone else’s work or critiquing discussion postings. “Don’t be afraid to let things get spirited. That’s the exciting part of the virtual class,” DiRamio says.
- Don’t try to reproduce the lecture hall. “The big course management systems that most instructors are asked to use are not necessarily the best for the online learning community design. They’re more designed to replicate the traditional class setting. Faculty looking to design in learning community features should look into more innovative ideas for virtual learning that incorporates the idea of enhancing communica-

tion capabilities in group work such as software that emphasizes group work space – almost like a table with chairs around it,” DiRamio says.

Next steps

DiRamio is going to take the findings from this study to develop a half-day seminar at Auburn based on the three factors (instructor’s role, connections, and student’s responsibility) and their indicators. Faculty who participate will then develop their online courses based on the seminar, and DiRamio will compare the results of courses designed using the information from this study with those designed without it.

DiRamio is also working on making the survey instrument available for use by others, which will increase the sample size and provide users with valuable feedback on their courses.

One thing that DiRamio stresses is that the results of the survey are not merely indicators of student satisfaction, but rather a measure of engagement, which he calls a proximal measure of learning. “What’s nice about this survey is that it’s not subject-matter dependent, but it does measure engagement and community. And all the literature on learning says that if students are engaged and there’s a sense of community, then they’re learning. If you think about it, it’s a proximal measure of learning. I can’t really prove that they are learning, but I can measure a precursor of learning – that students are engaged, that the class has a sense of community, and that students are sharing with each other and the instructor.”

For more information about David DiRamio’s work, visit <http://highered-data.org/>. @

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the community while adding to the course archive, which can benefit future students.

Rubinstein is working on developing interdisciplinary communities among courses that share common interests. For example, a community that uses this model might include courses in environmental design, sociology, geography, and history. “There are certain issues that overlap from one course to another, and each discipline constitutes at least one lens through which students can encounter various issues,” Rubinstein says.

Assignments can be structured so that students use these community portals, and, as with the model that has students participate in professional communities of interest, the assignments can be added to an ongoing course archive.

There are other opportunities for creating community in self-paced courses. For example, you can have students contribute to ongoing threaded discussions and have students who are further along in a course mentor those who are not as far along. “These ideas are ad hoc according to the faculty member’s preferences and styles,” Rubinstein says. “You can mandate participation, and sometimes you can have students write reviews of other students’ assignments.”

The level of community in self-paced courses also depends on the students’ comfort levels with interacting with other learners and members of other online communities. Recognizing that some students take online courses to maintain their anonymity, Rubinstein uses a guiding geographic metaphor in which the relationship between the student and instructor is home; interaction with other students is

the neighborhood; and there are also towns, regions, states, countries.

“One of the things I suggest to faculty is that they should never require the student to leave the neighborhood if they don’t want to. If part of the point of being in the online course is that they want to preserve anonymity, they can focus on the home and neighborhood while other students explore the porous boundaries between the course and the public and report back,” Rubinstein says.

Another project Rubinstein is working on to build community within self-paced courses is looking into the possibility of digitizing sessions from the University of Colorado’s Conference on World Affairs to be used as learning objects in interdisciplinary online communities. The idea is to offer these and other resources to faculty to use in their courses as they see fit.

Faculty may want to structure their courses around these interdisciplinary communities or offer assignment options for students that bring them in contact with people and resources outside the course. Rubinstein is not mandating that instructors completely retool their courses to have their students participate in these issue-oriented communities. “I just want my faculty to have a much broader sense of the options they have in terms of building community,” he says.

Reaching beyond course boundaries also fits with the university’s outreach mission. “A project that uses as a foundation the idea of porous boundaries between the classroom and the public is going to help the university meet its mission. If you just think in terms of the

connection between communities and where we are at this moment in terms of pedagogy — the learner designing his or her own experience — then there’s an important dance to be had between a culture of self-directed learning and the idea of community,” Rubinstein says.

For more information about independent learning at the University of Colorado, visit [@www.colorado.edu/cewww](http://www.colorado.edu/cewww).

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a course, and trust can sometimes be undermined with a single negative comment. If a student expresses negative comments that could disrupt trust, Coppola recommends communicating with that student privately via e-mail to try to get to the source of the negativity. “Sometimes when you have someone with a strong presence come forward with a social emotional negative response, that student can shift the course. The instructor always has to be the leader — not dominate or be aggressive — but very clearly deal with anything that can interfere with the cohesiveness of the group.”

In some cases it may be appropriate to delete inappropriate negative comments, Coppola says.

Reference

Coppola, Nancy W., Hiltz, Starr Roxanne, and Rotter, Naomi G. (2004) Building Trust in Virtual Teams. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, (June), 95-104. @

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bogged down in the details of the technology, you should begin with an introduction to Bloom's taxonomy of competencies in the cognitive domain: knowledge comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Having a background in Bloom's taxonomy will enable you to write clear learning outcomes, which are the foundation of any course.

When the learning outcomes are written clearly, they make developing assessment tools easier. For example, using the words "understand" and "know" in learning outcomes will not lead to measurable outcomes and therefore should be rewritten to express outcomes that can be measured with appropriate assessment tools.

In addition to knowing about pedagogy before proceeding with developing an online course, you should find out whether you are suited to being an online instructor. Like students, instructors should take a self-assessment to determine their readiness for the online classroom, Harris recommends.

The following URLs contain examples of simple faculty self-assessments for online instruction: www.netnet.org/instructors/design/assessment.htm and www.cobbk12.org/eHigh/eHighSchool/Application/SelfAssessmentTeacher.pdf @

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The same goes for having a direct link to the instructor's e-mail address. If there is an electronic link to the instructor's e-mail in an easily visible location, students won't have to try to remember it or fumble through printed materials or type it every time they need to contact the instructor.

"[Students] liked the fact that the syllabus was changed on a regular basis and that they could download it anywhere. Faculty came back and told us that they were getting higher evaluations because they were using the interactive syllabi, they assumed. But they were more aware of what the students needed because the students had a direct link to them via email," Mercurio says.

Including external, content-related links on the syllabus is one option, depending on the design of the course. If the course is totally online, it might be more appropriate to include those links in the course units or modules. But if the course is on campus with little else on the course website, including those links in syllabus might be the best option.

"We have some faculty who have a full-blown Blackboard course, and the external links are part of the learning units, and they don't necessarily need to be on the syllabus. We also have faculty just starting to use Blackboard. We would love them to all do a full-blown Blackboard course but we have faculty just figuring out the mouse and keyboard. They're in baby-step mode," MacDonald says.

Working on an interactive syllabus can serve as an introduction to online learning. Once instructors

see the possibilities, they can work up to creating a fully online course, which Mercurio refers to as "the ultimate interactive syllabus."

The interactive syllabus does not necessarily have to be a one-way form of communication. MacDonald suggests enlisting the help of students to point out dead links within the syllabus and also to add to the course's resources. "As the class proceeds, add resources that students find," MacDonald advises. "It gives students the feeling that they too have some power in the class."

"In our studies, we found that when students feel like they are being noticed, their retention rates are higher," Mercurio adds.

For the instructors, having an interactive syllabus made preparing for subsequent semesters easier because editing a relatively small Word document and checking its links is less work than updating the a document to reflect changes in institutional policies, MacDonald says.

Contact Laurie MacDonald at laurie.macdonald@unco.edu and Marge Mercurio at marge.mercurio@unco.edu. For more information about this project, visit www.unco.edu/equip/introduction/default.asp. @

Share Your Ideas

If you have developed an innovative online course or have some online teaching tips you would like to share with the readers of *Online Classroom*, contact Rob Kelly at [<robkelly@magnapubs.com>](mailto:robkelly@magnapubs.com).