

Running Head: Distance Learning Communities

Best Practices for Creating a Community of Learners
in a Distance Learning Environment

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Abstract

Research shows that student success and retention are enhanced when students feel a sense of community in their educational environment. A distance learning atmosphere presents unique challenges to the process of creating such an environment. This paper explores the roles of administrators, instructors, students, and other stakeholders in the creation of a community of learning, and best practices/models of successful distance learning communities.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
A Sense of Community	5
The Learning Community	6
Challenges of Creating a Distance Learning Community	8
Creating a Learning Community in a Distance Learning Program	10
The Importance of Dialogue	11
Dialogue and the Course Facilitator	13
Discourse and the Students	15
Best Teaching Practices	16
Administrators and Creating the Distance Learning Community	18
Transformational and Balanced Leadership	19
Conclusion	21
References	23

Introduction

Research shows that student success and retention are enhanced when students feel a sense of community in their educational environment (Tinto, 1993; Braxton, 2004; Rovai, 2002). The social connections that students make at their colleges and universities enhance their learning experiences and increase the likelihood of persistence at that institution. King (2000) notes that “peers play a vital role in how students view themselves and in the connection they make with the institution. In addition, peers influence students’ attitudes toward academic goals and values.” It is important that colleges and universities provide opportunities for students to engage with their peers in both academic and social ways, in order to promote that feeling of connectedness with each other and the institution, as well as to enhance learning (Tinto, 1993).

Institutions of higher education are increasingly incorporating distance education programs into their curricula to meet student demand (Simonson et al, 2003). According to Terrell (2005), 80% of all institutions of higher learning currently offer distance education programs. With this growth in the availability of distance education courses, however, comes the concern that dropout rates are often 10-20% higher in distance education classes than in traditional ones (Rovai, 2002; Cavanaugh, 2005; Wojciechowski, 2005). Research shows that the geographic separation of distance education students may attribute to feelings of isolation lack of focus/attention, and depersonalization, which may negatively affect retention in the program (Rovai, 2002). The distance administrator must concern himself with all possible aspects of the program that may affect student success and persistence. This paper focuses on distance education

programs as learning communities, and on how administrators and other stakeholders can build that sense of community within their programs to enhance student retention.

A Sense of Community

What is a community? According to Gardner (1990), a community is not merely a geographic place where all people share the same beliefs, traditions, and values, as one might have defined it in the past; many “communities” today encompass diverse peoples of various races, religions, and creeds. He notes that he has visited countless schools; many felt like communities, and others were simply places students went to execute academic tasks. He pondered the differences between the two groups, and in his analysis discovered what he considers to be the characteristics of a community, which include a sense of oneness that embraces diversity, shared culture, effective intercommunication, caring, trust, collaboration, respect, shared governance, opportunities for personal growth, and good relations with the larger community. Gardner speaks to leaders as he notes, “Skill in the building of community is not just another of the innumerable requirements of contemporary leadership. It is one of the highest and most essential skills a leader can command” (1990). Effective leadership is key to the success of any endeavor, including the leadership of distance learning programs. The importance of building community should be clear to the distance education administrator who wishes to not only provide a satisfying learning experience for students, but who also wishes to retain them in the program.

The Learning Community

According to Tinto (1997), discussion about learning communities begins in the very heart of where students and faculty typically meet: in college classrooms. Classrooms can be construed as mini-communities within the larger university or college community. Learning communities meet both academic and social needs; however, not all classrooms can be defined as learning communities, because it is only communities that incorporate active, student-centered learning (versus passive, faculty-centered learning) that can meet both the academic and the social needs of students.

Many college classrooms are lecture-based; the professor lectures, the students listen, and few students within each class participate in discussion. Students complete outside assignments and homework on their own, in isolation. In this situation there is generally very little interaction between students. In this scenario, academic needs may be met, but social needs are not.

Williams, Paprock, and Covington (1999) caution against designing instruction that relies upon long lectures as a mode of information delivery in teleclasses; “chunking” lectures into short segments, interspersed with activities that promote student engagement, promotes the interactivity necessary to help build a sense of community (versus a sense of isolation and disengagement). In an active learning environment, the faculty member acts more as a facilitator rather than a lecturer. Students are encouraged to participate, to work together, and to interact with one another and the instructor. As students discuss and work with the concepts being taught, both their academic and social needs are met. They begin to integrate the academics with their lives in general, and just

as important, they begin to form a sense of belonging, as sense of community, with their classmates and instructor.

A learning community might entail more than just an individual classroom, however. A learning community might also encompass groups of students who take several classes together, or who are studying in the same major. These groups are generally linked by common learning goals, or perhaps they are linked by common needs, such as students who are taking freshman transition courses. The learning communities might also be linked by common “themes” that link courses into an interdisciplinary program (Tinto, 1997).

Whatever the structure, Tinto believes that most learning communities have three things in common: *shared knowledge*, *shared knowing*, and *shared responsibility* (Tinto, 1997). *Shared knowledge* refers to the subject area content that the students have in common; whether the students are in the same classroom or the same interdisciplinary program or major, the students share an academic knowledge base. *Shared knowing* refers to students’ familiarity with one another on social and academic levels. *Shared responsibility* means that students must work collaboratively on academic tasks and projects, each doing his or her part to advance the learning of the group.

Rovai (2002), on the other hand, defines a classroom community “in terms of four dimensions: spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectations and goals.” *Spirit* refers to the feelings of friendship and belonging within the group. *Trust* refers to the trust that takes place when group members work together; members of the group must believe that other members are reliable and have their best interests at heart. *Interaction* is important not only in its quantity but its quality; as members interact with one another

and disclose personal information, others will reciprocate, and relationships are formed. *Common expectations* refers to the learning that is taking place; community members derive satisfaction from participating in the group activity because their learning goals are concurrently being met (Rovai, 2002).

Although Gardner, Tinto, and Rovai define *communities* using different terminologies, one thing is clear: communities inculcate a sense of caring, belonging, and collaboration among their members. It seems that the process of instilling a sense of caring and belonging among members of a distance education course might present some difficulties to those responsible for setting up the program. Seemingly just as difficult is the process of encouraging collaboration among class members who are unable to become acquainted face-to-face in a traditional classroom environment, in order to develop the trust that is necessary in working collaboratively. The next section explores the process of creating a distance learning community.

Challenges of Creating a Distance Learning Community

Gardner (1990) defined community in terms of the attributes of community members, rather than community as a geographic place. Using his definition, one might see the possibility of a “virtual learning community.” However, if one defines community as place, as some students did in Brown’s (2001) study of adult distance education students, they may not perceive their experiences in the courseroom as building “community” at all. The first challenge, then, in building community in a distance education program, is for all stakeholders to hold a common definition of what a learning community should be.

The second challenge is for stakeholders to believe that building community is possible, and for stakeholders to see the academic benefits of helping to build such a community. Brown (2001) notes that some students are not willing to participate in discourse if its purpose is relationship building rather than academic; that is, if the discourse does not directly contribute to the student's grade, the student will not participate. Some students are not willing to participate more than is absolutely necessary to earn the desired grade because they do not realize the added benefit of deeper engagement in the course.

The third challenge is the cynicism of some that it is possible to build caring relationships between students and instructors in an asynchronous online learning environment, when students and instructor do not enjoy the privilege of face-to-face meetings and the communication benefits such as voice inflections, facial expressions, gestures, and body language. How does one begin to truly care about coursemates or an instructor who are seemingly faceless and voiceless?

In a virtual courseroom, one's voice is heard through the written word, reflections often recorded in a format called the "discussion thread." Coursemates and instructors identify one other by name, and perhaps by writing style and continuity of thoughts, but most likely one will never hear the name of one's coursemate pronounced out loud by the person so named. The traditional characteristics that endear us to those who are in close physical proximity are absent. In addition, those who possess poor writing skills may be daunted in a threaded discussion environment, where all discourse is written. This is a formidable challenge in online learning, but one that can be overcome.

Finally, students who have poor computer skills may find the distance learning environment to be challenging. To overcome this, online learning programs must provide orientation and training programs so that students know how to properly use all of the features of the courserooms and resources. In addition, distance learning faculties require training in technology and in the unique challenges of online teaching as well. Studies show that online teaching and learning are more time-consuming than traditional programs (Kosak, 2005).

Creating a Learning Community in a Distance Learning Program

The question arises, then, as to how a community of learners is formed in a learning environment in which the faculty and students are separated from one another by geographic distance. Neither Gardner's nor Tinto's definitions of community address the issue of geographic distance; however, how does one develop *shared knowing*, for example, when students may be hundreds of miles apart and in different time zones? What components are necessary to creating a distance learning community that promotes the sharing of academic knowledge, the opportunity for social interaction, and opportunities for collaborative learning?

Rovai (2002) believes that the concept of learning community is not limited to the traditional, bricks-and-mortar classroom, where students can become acquainted face-to-face with one another and their instructor. He admits that creating a community of learning can be particularly challenging in a distance learning environment. Nonetheless, he lists seven factors that research says correlate positively to the creation of a sense of

community within the virtual classroom: the lessening of psychological distance between students and instructor through frequent dialogue, a mutual sense of social interaction, equal opportunity for participation in discourse for all students, small group work, facilitation of group discussion, skillful teaching that is on the appropriate level for students, and small (no fewer than 8 and no more than 20-30) class size.

The Importance of Dialogue

Dialogue is the most important tool in building a learning community (Byers, 2000). To build and sustain a learning community, personal interaction that closes the gap of transactional distance must be maintained (American Federation of Teachers, 2000). Brown (2001) conducted research to evaluate the process of community building in an asynchronous adult online class, focusing on the use of dialogue to build relationships between students and instructors. She noted that there were three stages of community development: (1) making friends; (2) acceptance of individual students into the learning community; and (3) camaraderie. The process of making friends began with introductions (online), and students who found that they had characteristics or experiences in common tended to gravitate toward one another in the discussion courserooms. The next stage, acceptance into the learning community, occurred after students participated in a lengthy, reflective threaded discussion on a topic that was pertinent to all in the class. To be included in the discussion, and to have other students respond to one's own ideas posted in the thread, meant that others accepted and respected that student's thoughts. This perception of acceptance and respect led to a feeling of

belonging to the group, a feeling of community. The highest level of community, camaraderie, often occurred between students who had shared several courses together, those who contacted one another via phone or email outside the courseroom, or those who had met in person. Those who felt the highest level of community seemed to be the most willing to make the course a priority and tended to invest more time in the course. These learners tended to enter into the class discussions in a timely manner, contributed more to the class, and were the most highly motivated learners. Those who felt the most community tended to be the most engaged, and those who were the most engaged tended to build community more than those who were not as engaged in the course. Those who were the least engaged tended to contribute less, spend less time in the course, and were more likely to report that they did not feel a sense of community in the courseroom (Brown, 2001).

Both quantity and quality of dialogue within the virtual classroom are important in creating a sense of community (Edelstein and Edwards, 2004). First, learners must interact frequently with one another in order to become acquainted and comfortable. Class size is important in ensuring that this is possible. Class sizes of fewer than 8-10 learners make it difficult for enough varied discourse to occur to build community, whereas class sizes of greater than 30 students create an intimidating number of discussion posts that may overwhelm learners and inhibit their ability to get to know one another well enough to feel comfortable. Second, communication styles may also inhibit equality of discourse among learners. Those who write authoritatively may intimidate other learners and discourage them from posting. It is important that the facilitator

moderates such postings and ensures that all learners are provided with equal opportunity to express themselves in discussions (Rovai, 2002).

Dialogue and the Course Facilitator

The course facilitator plays an important role in encouraging meaningful discussion within the courseroom. Moore (1997), in his discussion regarding transactional distance, which is defined as the psychological distance between students and their instructor, notes that in distance education there is a psychological and communications gap that must be closed. There is always some transactional distance between students and their instructors, even in traditional education programs, and it is influenced by personalities and even the course content, but when there is a physical separation between students and instructors, this gap can inhibit the development of meaningful dialogue in the courseroom, unless instructors take steps to overcome this.

The first very important step that a course facilitator can do is to make initial contacts with students and invite them to introduce themselves to others in the courseroom. This helps to “break the ice” and begin conversation within the class. Creating welcome pages, videos, and adding other personal touches creates an inviting atmosphere that helps students to become comfortable in the course, with the instructor and with each other. Orientation to WebCT or other technologies in the course can also be helpful in encouraging students to get involved and become familiar with the tools necessary for success in the course (Carroll-Barefield et al, 2005). Another step that course facilitators can take is to ensure that adequate dialogue is encouraged is to provide guidance through

dialogue with learners and to provide course structure that is open enough to allow individual interactions among the students. Rigid course structures that allow little interaction between students and instructors increase the amount of transactional distance (Moore, 1997).

Edelstein and Edwards (2004) note that the wording of discussion topic questions is critical in that it must be complex enough to be a catalyst for reflective discussion. The questions must also closely relate to the learning objectives of the unit. The number of questions asked in any one unit is also important. There must not be so many questions for students to answer in each module that answering them would become burdensome; students must have the opportunity to reflect upon their responses and upon the responses of others in order to generate dialogue that helps them and their classmates to learn. The facilitator must also decide, too, how and how often he or she intends to respond to student discussion threads to provide encouragement or guidance. Williams, Paprock, and Covington (1999) note that feedback encourages learner involvement and helps to “span the distance” of the communications gap. Although their book focuses on distance learning courses that rely on technologies other than online discourse venues (such as televised teaching, which includes feedback skills such as voice pitch, body posture, and nonverbal cues), they note that instructors should use feedback that encourages learner involvement. Strategies such as addressing learners by name can help engage them.

It is also important for the course facilitator to communicate clear expectations regarding student postings. How frequently they must post, the amount of detail that is expected, due dates, whether spelling counts, the level of formality or informality that is expected, whether assertions must be referenced, and other requirements should be

clearly laid out by the instructor during the first days of the course. Edelstein and Edwards (2004) suggest that instructors use a rubric to assess the quality of student discussion responses. They also suggest that the following criteria be assessed to ensure that the discussion threads contribute to the building of the online learning community: promptness in posting (are the posts timely, so that others have a chance to respond?), attention to detail (are spelling and grammar correct?), written expression (are opinions clearly stated and supported with evidence?), and collaborative contribution (does the posting help to develop the learning experience?) Communicating clear expectations removes the veil of uncertainty regarding the standards for posting and encourages student participation.

Discourse and the Students

The course facilitator holds great responsibility for encouraging discourse in the virtual or teleclassroom, but in a collaborative learning environment, students also are responsible for contributing to the discussions, and for helping one another in the learning process. The facilitator can aid in this process by serving as an effective leader within the courseroom (effective leadership is discussed later in this paper). However, some student characteristics can affect the level of participation in the discourse process (Brown, 2001).

Brown notes that adult learners in an online course show various levels of willingness and confidence in initiating and participating in threaded discussions. She states that students who are less experienced in participating in threaded discourse may initially be

intimidated by the level of intensity, the vocabulary used, and the length of discussion contributions by learners who are more experienced participants in online courses. She discovered, however, that after a few weeks, the less experienced learners seemed to become more comfortable with the discussion venue, and they seemed to participate more often and more intensely after that. Perhaps they learned from the models that the more experienced students presented in their own discourse (Brown, 2001). In a collaborative learning community, this type of sharing of knowledge and skills between more skilled learners and less skilled learners is to be expected.

Brown also notes that some learners participate more often than is required from the instructor, and some participate just as much as required for the desired grade, and not more. Brown attributes the self-imposed limits that students place on their participation in discourse to issues such as time management problems, challenges that cause the students to disengage, such as illness, and a lack of willingness to contribute to a community effort, perhaps due to a lack of awareness relating to the benefits of such participation, or their own personal definition of community (2001).

Best Teaching Practices to Develop and Maintain Online Communities

Robertson, Grant, and Jackson (2005) contend that there are a number of “best practices” that help to build and foster online learning communities. Their list includes:

- (1) Frequent contacts between students and faculty are important to decrease transactional distance and encourage students to get the help they need from faculty. The more that students and faculty practice communicating with one

another, the more comfortable they become with one another, helping to create relationships that evolve into a sense of community, that sense of “we’re all in this together.”

- (2) Educational practice that helps to develop collaborative learning among students helps to develop their problem-solving skills and helps to foster a sense of community. Collaborative learning requires a sense of responsibility toward one’s own learning and that of others.
- (3) Active learning is vital to the development of online communities and it enhances learning.
- (4) Instructors should give prompt, quality feedback. The quality of feedback is affected by such factors as technology skills, interest level, and amount of preparation.
- (5) Teachers should communicate high expectations to students, and efficient use of the technology to optimize time on task should be emphasized.
- (6) Diverse talents and learning styles should be respected in the courseroom. Diversity of talents and backgrounds leads to richer and more varied contributions to discourse in the classroom when differences are respected and those who are “different” are accepted by others in the learning community (Robertson et al, 2005).

Providing discussion boards, opportunities for coursemates to review one another’s assignments, and opportunities for chat sessions also help students to build community (Kosak, 2005). Encouraging “personal talk” as well as academic discourse is important for the integration of social needs and academic requirements.

Administrators and Creating the Distance Learning Community

Distance education administrators have many issues and concerns when it comes to managing web-based courses, and many of their concerns are related to issues that affect the building of the distance learning community. According to Simonson et al (2003, p. 254), distance education course web site design must be user-friendly and consistent throughout the course. The technologies that are being used should provide ample venues for student discourse to take place. The course site should be secure enough so that student assessments, student personal information, and other sensitive information, including courseroom discussions, are not viewable by the public. Trust is a key component in the building of community; students must be able to trust the courseroom site, or they will not use it to its potential.

The availability of student support is also of concern to the distance learning administrator. Instructor "virtual office hours" (Simonson et al, 2003), advising, counseling, technical assistance, financial aid, tutoring, library services, and other assistance normally available in a bricks-and-mortar program must also be part of the distance learner's support system (American Federation of Teachers, 2000). The courseroom is in itself a small learning community; however, it is up to the larger institution, itself a learning community, to support the needs of the students. It is particularly important to provide support to distance learners, who may feel disenfranchised if they are not offered services comparable to those offered "traditional students."

Finally, administrators must be concerned with the actual course design and quality of teaching in online courses. Teaching that promotes active, student-centered learning that takes into account the special characteristics and needs of online learners, while incorporating teaching practices that help to build community, should be the goal of every higher education distance education administrator. Providing training for all distance education instructors under his guidance is the administrator's responsibility. Good teaching practices, effectively enhanced by reliable, user-friendly technology and excellent course design, ensure a high-quality online learning experience.

Transformational and Balanced Leadership

One of the attributes necessary for effective leadership in any organization, but especially one such as distance learning that relies on fast-changing technologies for delivery, is the ability of the administrator to deal with and effect change within the organization. According to Kirby, Paradise, and King (1992) transformational leaders possess four characteristics: charisma (the ability to cause followers to be loyal and involved), individualized consideration (treating followers on a one-on-one basis, helping them with their own development), intellectual stimulation (encouraging risk-taking), and inspiration (increasing follower knowledge of common goals, appealing through the emotions). Transformational leadership strengthens followers by providing opportunities for them to develop their skills and fulfill their own goals. Transformational leadership encourages followers to follow, at least in part, because followers are intrinsically rewarded by doing so. When one examines the attributes of transformational leadership

and the attributes of community, one will note some similarities. In fact, a transformational higher education administrator is very much a leader of a community—a learning community—and it is his responsibility to foster that feeling of community among his faculty.

Cashman (1998) notes that transformational leaders must achieve “balance mastery,” the state of balancing work, relaxation, and the attainment of personal goals, or they may experience some difficulty in getting followers to follow them; yet, it is difficult for many leaders to take steps to strike the life balance necessary to achieve four characteristics of people who live long, healthy, productive lives: optimism, engagement in life in general, mobility/fitness, and adaptability to loss/change. He describes this process as a “type of centered fluidity that lets us go in any direction with ease and agility”(1998). Those who consider themselves to be transformational leaders must possess the flexibility to be at ease with change in order to encourage their followers to also embrace it. Without balance mastery, this is not possible.

Cashman notes that there are ten signs of balance mastery. Among them are abundant (but not nervous) energy, vitality, enthusiasm, easy achievement, intrinsic motivation, optimal productivity, optimism, and the ability to form fulfilling relationships--all qualities of a good leader in general, and certainly positive attributes for a community leader. The signs of imbalance contrast with these: nervous energy, unfocused thinking, extrinsic motivation, negativity, poor relationship skills, and so on (1998). The absence of good relationship building skills particularly and negatively affects the community building process, but so does unfocused thinking. The successful learning community shares common goals and expectations, and an unfocused leader is unlikely to be able to

clearly communicate and tie together what those common goals and expectations should be.

It is leadership that embraces change that is vital for distance learning programs to keep up with rapidly changing technologies, while providing transformative leadership for faculty and students to guide them through the changes. Cashman defines leadership, from the inside out, as "authentic self-expression that creates value" (1998); that is, leadership begins deep within the leader. The transformational leader seeks to effect change within his or her learning community, but in order to do that, he or she must first be able and willing to effect change within him/herself, if necessary, to exude the qualities of a dynamic learning community leader.

Conclusion

Building a learning community in a distance learning environment is not only possible, but absolutely imperative in order to enhance the effects of learning and to retain students. Building community begins with leadership—university leadership to provide overall support for distance learning programs within the institution, distance learning administrators, and instructors. The responsibility of building a collaborative learning community also lies with students. Active learning requires the cooperation, time investment, and effort of everyone involved, and most of all, active learning and community building are accomplished through engaging discussions that take place both inside and outside the classrooms. Instructors, by using the techniques outlined in this paper, can exert great influence over the quantity and quality of community-building and

learning-enhancing discourse that takes place in their virtual courserooms and teleclasses. Administrators can ensure that instructors receive the technological support, training, and other resources necessary to provide quality instruction and effective, community building facilitation to students.

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