

COMMUNITIES VS. COLLABORATION IN ONLINE COURSES

Anne Papworth—Department of English

As with classroom courses, online courses involve many components: content delivery, assignments, technology, retention, assessment. This article addresses a concept that tacitly informs all of these aspects, yet is rarely made explicit in course development: the theory of online communities. Here I will provide a theoretical foundation regarding online communities and a brief look at the practical implications of this theory for online course development.

Principle five of the university's learning model reminds us to consider community in online course development: "Learners and teachers at BYU-Idaho love, serve, and teach one another." Based on this principle, and the overall learning model, we have seen an increased focus on collaborative learning across campus. However, collaboration and community are incorrectly used as synonyms. Educators frequently fail to distinguish between "a *community* of learners and a *group* of students learning collaboratively."¹ This distinction must be made. Social constructivist theory, reflected in principle five of the learning model, does allow that collaboration can be an excellent method for learners to teach one another. Yet, this principle adds the additional goals that learners love and serve, implying a community founded on actions and attitudes beyond collaboration. Online courses may establish collaboration; however, community is not guaranteed. Defining community can assist educators in evaluating how well an online course will actually foster an online community.

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DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNITY

Defining community is not a simple task. One study² identified ninety-four varying definitions. However, we can begin by noting trends in definitions and evaluating commonalities and distinctions within these definitions.

One aspect of community relates to the tasks and activities completed by community members. Community implies participating in a system of activities that allows participants to build and share their understanding of these activities.³ This "focus on a mutual practice or enterprise" can be what initiates a community.⁴

Mistakenly some course developers limit their view of community to this narrow definition. In fact, one learning theory reflects this view by invoking the term task-based learning communities. In task-based learning communities, members are grouped together based on the tasks

(individual and collective) to be accomplished. Once the task has been completed, the group dissolves. Although knowledge is created during the project, the episodic nature of the community, driven by the project itself, leads to an isolation of knowledge. Learning is not easily applied outside this project and is frequently lost when the group disbands.⁵ Although labeled a learning community, task-based communities are actually discrete collaborative project teams, without the other benefits that come from a true community.

To further explore the definition of community, I note that community is not limited by “visible boundaries.”⁶ With the Internet, community is no longer restricted to one geographic location or even a particular time frame, as courses hinge on asynchronous activities such as email and discussion posts. Breaking the definition of community from physical boundaries is critical for online courses. These students do not have commonly shared physical boundaries. Even the computer screen or work station (the physicality of the student’s “classroom”) will differ among students. While the uniformity of I-Learn promotes ease of navigation, it does not inherently create a shared *communal* space. As a result, online students may not feel part of a class but rather isolated learners.

If community is not task-based or defined by location, what is it? “Pioneers of online community development and research Howard Rheingold (1993) and Roxanne Hiltz (1985) used the term ‘online community’ to connote...intense feelings of camaraderie, empathy, and support.”⁷ Barab, Kling, and Gray define community as “a persistent, sustained [socio-technical] network of individuals who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base, set of beliefs, values, history, and experiences.”⁸ These definitions reflect the emotional investment individuals have with other participants and in the community itself.

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EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT

This emotional investment hinges on several elements. First is longevity. There is no specific time frame attached to longevity. For example, few would argue a community must exist at least one year to be a true community. However, some longevity is necessary to provide a communal history among participants because this shared history leads to trust.⁹

Trust can be a key issue in online communities because online interaction doesn’t allow the same interpretive signals that face-to-face communication affords.¹⁰ For example, body language and vocal inflections are frequently absent (unless video is used). Participants must use other reference points to determine if they trust the other members in the community. Online communities frequently use consistency to evaluate other members’ trustworthiness. Members evaluate others for consistency of phrasing, consistent respect of work, or consistently following through

on promises. “If enough of [the] pieces seem to fit together,”¹¹ a member is considered trustworthy within the community. Yet, having enough experiences to allow for this assessment takes time that online courses struggle to provide. Semesters are finite time frames and students frequently begin group projects within the first days of the semester.

Consistency is just one measure of trust. Trust may also be defined, within the framework of online communities, as making oneself vulnerable to another person by relying on that person to “perform a particular action important to the trustor.”¹² Students functioning collaboratively, not communally, frequently resist group projects because they do not trust the other members to fulfill responsibilities.

A community requires time, a shared history, beliefs and values, and trust. This is difficult to achieve in online courses. Therefore, it may be natural to ask: “Can’t instructors be satisfied with a collaborative model instead?” We shouldn’t be. Devoting time to building online communities is worthwhile. While there are many benefits to online community, as opposed to collaboration, I will focus on just one.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

As students participate in authentic online communities, they can achieve social capital.¹³ Educator LJ Hanifan, one of the originators of the concept of social capital, defines it as:

Those tangible substances [that] count most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit.... The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself.... If he [gains entry into a community], there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and...[lead] to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors.¹⁴

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Currently, many students in online courses are on-campus students using an online course to supplement their education. However, the vision for online learning is that many students will be physically distant, perhaps never coming to the Idaho campus. The university is addressing this issue through the Pathway Program, which partners online courses with student interaction through CES Institutes. Yet, it seems implausible that all students participating in online education through BYU–Idaho will have access to this program. Therefore, online communities, established in online courses, may be one of the few ways for these students to gain the social capital necessary to help them succeed.

APPLICATION OF THEORY

So how do we foster online communities? First, instructors should realize that most communities cannot be imposed on individuals. Groups can be assigned, but this does not create community.¹⁵ Instead, instructors must provide opportunities for trust building, identity sharing, and other student interactions beyond coursework.¹⁶ Some suggestions for accomplishing this include offering students private locations for conversation and exploration (outside the public discussion board). Additionally, instructors can build trust with students by maintaining a casual communication style.¹⁷ Community members also need a sense of ownership for the community and responsibility for finding out how to function within the community. Instructors who assume *all* responsibility for navigating the online course can actually prevent students from becoming part of the online community.¹⁸

This is obviously not a comprehensive list. My main point, however, is that instructors who design and teach courses that foster community by promoting a shared history, emotional investment, and trust can offer students a richer online academic experience. ☺

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NOTES

- 1 Sasha Barab, Rob Kling, and James Gray, "Introduction: Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning," *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, ed. Sasha A. Barab, Rob Kling, and James Gray, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2004), 3.
- 2 Jenny Preece and Diane Maloney-Krichmar, "Online communities: Design, Theory, and Practice," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10 no. 4 (2005), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue4/preece.html> (accessed October 2008).
- 3 Barab, "Introduction," 7.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Margaret Riel and Linda Polin, "Online Communities: Common Ground and Critical Differences in Designing Technical Environments," *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, ed. Sasha A. Barab, Rob Kling, and James Gray, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2004), 38-39.
- 6 Barab, "Introduction," 7.
- 7 Preece, "Online communities."
- 8 Barab, "Introduction," 6-7.
- 9 John W. Jordan, "A Virtual Death and a Real Dilemma: Identity, Trust, and Community in Cyberspace," *Southern Communication Journal* 70 no. 3 (2005): 203.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., 204.
- 12 Iris Junglas et al., "Identity Formation, Learning Styles and Trust in Virtual Worlds," *The DATA BASE for Advances in Information Systems* 38 no. 4 (2007): 94.

- 13 Nicole Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe, "The Benefits of Facebook 'Friends': Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 4 (2007), <http://www.jcmc.edu/vol12/issue4/ellison.html> (accessed September 2008).
- 14 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 6.
- 15 Priscilla Norton and Karin Wiburg, *Teaching with Technology: Designing Opportunities to Learn*, 2nd ed. (U.S.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2003), 7.
- 16 Chih-Hsiung Tu, *Online Collaborative Learning Communities*, (Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited, 2004), 98.
- 17 Ibid., 98-99.
- 18 Norton, *Teaching with Technology: Designing Opportunities to Learn*, 194 no. 15.