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Teaching Online Tip #3: Stages and Steps in Building a Learning Community

Literature on online learning *promotes*, *encourages* and *recommends* creating a learning community to increase learning and learner satisfaction. (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Brown, 2001; McElrath & McDowell, 2008) Building community, then, is a skill that is part of the expertise of an online teacher and that you will probably want to develop.

The questions about building community that immediately come to mind include:

- What is community?
- Why is building community important? Is it more important in an online course?
- What are the stages in the evolution of a learning community?
- What are the steps/actions that you can take to grow a learning community?

This tip takes each of these questions in turn. If you want to go directly to the stages and the steps for building community, you can use the headings and you are on your way!

What is Community?

Here are some of the definitions of community compiled by Brown (2001, p. 20) in her study on how community is formed in online courses.

- Community-building (is) creating a sense of belonging, of continuity, of being connected to others and to ideas and values (Sergiovanni, 1994.)
- A community of learners (is) a group of people with "a shared purpose, good communication, and a climate with justice, discipline, caring, and occasions for celebration" (Boyer,1995)
- Community is achieved when there is "support from people who share common joys and trials" (Dede, 1996).

Brown interviewed 21 graduate students and three faculty members from three graduate-level distance education classes about their understanding of community and how it developed in an online course. When the participants in Brown's study were asked to identify characteristics of a community, their responses coalesced into this definition:

- Members of a community "generally have something in common, whether it is interests, experiences, goals, values or vision."

The study participants also attempted to define a "learning community" as distinct from a more general community. Their responses included a distinctive characteristic of shared responsibility for learning.

- Participants in a learning community feel they are responsible in part not just for their own learning but for others' learning, too.

This characteristic, being partially responsible for fellow students, may be one indicator of a successful learning community, and that we might see more of it in future research.

Why is Building Community Important? Is it More Important in an Online Course?

The primary reason that building community is important in an online course is that the shared feelings and experiences of a community appear to reduce the likelihood that students will feel isolated and alone. While feelings of isolation can also happen frequently in campus courses, other shared experiences on campus can mitigate these feelings.

So, yes, building community is more important in an online course because it contributes to a feeling of connectedness, support, and shared experiences, and by extension, to retention and learning success. Some of the techniques for community building, such as sharing pictures, favorite movies and music, and working collaboratively on small and large assignments and projects, naturally create common areas of feelings, values and interests. Even if feelings and values are different, members of a community respect the legitimacy of such feelings and values. Feelings of support and connectedness are part of the social and cognitive presence described in an earlier tip.

A Three-Stage Process for Community-Building in Online Learning

We know that community does not just happen and that there are certain stages and phases in online courses (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004.) Similarly, Brown's theory-making study identified three stages in the community-building process and observed that achieving these stages of community may require a degree of engagement beyond what might normally be required in a single course. Here are the stages that the learners generally go through in the building of community.

- Stage 1: Making friends on-line with those students with whom they feel comfortable communicating. This stage is part of the early social presence in the course beginnings.
- Stage 2: Community conferment (acceptance). Community conferment often occurs following a " long, thoughtful, threaded discussion on a subject of importance." The discussion may have included feelings of a shared experience and generated feelings of satisfaction and kinship with the other participants. This stage usually occurs during the early middle to the late middle of a course.
- Stage 3: This is characterized by camaraderie generally achieved following "long-term or intense association with others involving personal communication." This stage may or not happen with every course. In this stage of learning community, student engagement is generally more intense as students are often working collaboratively on projects. Stage 3 does happen frequently with cohorts who stay together through 12 to 18 months of master's degrees.

Faculty Behaviors for Launching Community for Stage 1

Faculty can support the initial phase of the community-building process by inviting personal introductions in week one of a course, such as sharing one's favorite study place or personal interests. One quality of the introduction question that often results in delightful initial responses is to ask students a simple question about themselves that is safe, straightforward and yet shares something insightful about the uniqueness of the students. The goal is multi-faceted — getting the students using the tools and interacting, allowing for "early discovery of commonalities," and beginning the process of creating a course community. I still remember the delight of three participants in one of my workshops when they discovered that they all had adopted children! As part of this process it is good for the faculty to share some professional and life experiences as well

creating "threads of connection" such as "I lived in Pennsylvania for five years, too" or Yes, I have had an experience working for "for-profit companies as well!"

A good companion question in the first week of the course is to ask the student to identify their learning goal(s) for the course — shifting from the social "cocktail" interaction to thinking and discussing the course content and personal learning goals. This question about goals helps to provide insights as to the state of the learners' knowledge, confidence and experience with the content.

What are faculty behaviors in the first stage?

- Positive, supportive, encouraging comments
- Clarifying comments about course learning outcomes and course expectations
- Pointers to other resources and staff members of the instructional team to broaden support choices
- Eliciting successful online strategies from the learners

Faculty Behaviors for Building Community – Stage 2

A common question that new and experienced online faculty often struggle with is just how involved they should be in the student discussions. This is not surprising because the level of faculty involvement ideally changes over the course of a course. A faculty member is quite involved in the early part of the course when course expectations, and processes are being clarified, but less involved later on in the course. In this early stage, faculty can explain the "ground rules" for the discussions so students know what is expected of them and what is not allowed, etc. Students can also contribute to setting the ground rules in this stage.

Garrison (2006) noted that a key advantage of online learning is that the interaction pattern is "group-centered" rather than "authority-centered." This means that for some discussions, particularly later in the course, that the faculty member observes, monitors and comments more as a collaborative member of the community.

A good strategy in weeks two through four of an online class is to create dyads or other small groups to work on content-related assignments. For classes that have a mix of veteran online students and newbies this strategy can create a comfortable way for students to develop confidence in the process and in the environment.

What are faculty behaviors in this building stage of community?

- Modeling supportive community building comments and interactions
- Continuing clarifications about processes
- Open-ended questions about what students think and think they know
- Making positive "substantive" observations about student's participation
- Encouraging the identifying of relationships and linking of ideas
- Encouraging the linking of course content to current events, problems
- Challenging students to share questions and strategies and insights about the course content
- Facilitating the student to student discussion
- Delegating some of the facilitation of groups to the students on a rotating basis

Setting Expectations Regarding a Community of Learning

Research consistently identifies clear expectations about a course and course responsibilities, in terms of assessment, etc. as essential to learner satisfaction. This

research suggests that as online learning develops, creating clearer expectations about what it means to be contributing and supportive members of a learning community will also be helpful. Research by Vesely, Bloom, and Sherlock (2007) suggests instructor modeling as very desirable and effective.

For community-building the discussion area or forum of an online course is where connections are made and the community of learning supporting learning and discovery happens. Whether you design your course with a discussion board for each chapter or use one general discussion forum for the entire course, or both, monitoring and supporting the exchanges of these online places is where you help create and build community of learners.

Conclusion

As you will have noticed many of the steps and behaviors for building community are the same as those steps for developing social, teaching and cognitive presence. In fact, these three presences are part of what helps to constitute community.

Call or email with suggestions, questions, and your experiences in your online teaching experiences.

References and Resources

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Note: These Online Teaching tips are for faculty who are teaching online in Rider University's College of Continuing Studies [CCS]. These tips are part of an ecoaching service from Judith V. Boettcher at ecoach@designingforlearning.org. More tips are at http://www.designingforlearning.info/. Contact Judith with questions, requests to review your courses, and any other requests focused on providing the best teaching and learning experiences possible for Rider faculty and students.