Creating Learning Communities in Online Classrooms

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The term *community* is used to refer to a lot of loosely related concepts.[1] A clue to its true meaning, however, lies in its Latin root, *communis*, meaning "commonly shared." Thus, a "community" consists of individuals who are connected by something they hold in common. Parker Palmer, in his seminal work, *To Know as We Are Known*, observes that "at the frontiers of intellectual life, scholars now regard the concept of community as indispensable in describing the terrain that educators inhabit."[2]

But what does this mean in practical terms? What are the implications of community for the learning environment in general, and the *online* environment in particular? How can educators facilitate its development?

Seeking Community

The idea of community harmonizes with God's design for human beings—to be intelligent, communicative, moral meaning-makers and decision-makers. In essence, humans are *relational* beings who do not function optimally unless they *are* in community. As John Donne wrote, "No man is an island." Similar sentiments are echoed in Paul's metaphor, "the body of Christ." The sad reality, however, is that because of the Fall, we all experience fragmentation and alienation both personally and corporately.

By Don C. Roy and Shirley A. Freed

Education's Goal

From a Christian perspective, the goal of education is to reverse this predicament---to restore connectedness and wholeness through a process of development that encompasses the physical, mental, social, spiritual, and emotional faculties.[3] This requires a teaching style and curricula that integrate the various aspects of education in ways that are meaningful for every student.

The *Learning* Community

Traditionally, learners have been regarded as mere receptors in a one-directional process. However, learning represents a *dialectic* relationship between individuals and their community. This places obligations and responsibilities on individual members, whose contributions affect the ethos, culture, and integrity of the learning process. Each person makes unique contributions to the whole.

Wilson and Ryder state that "groups become communities when they interact with each other and

stay together long enough to form a set of habits and conventions, and when they come to depend upon each other for the accomplishment of certain ends."[4] Dwayne Huebner uses the metaphor of weaving to describe how individuals create a "fabric of life"[5] that interweaves ideas, abstractions, memories, biblical metaphors, and cultural mores derived from the faith community and the relationships within it. He argues that a life lived in the intimacy and context of those relationships affirms a personal and a collective past that, in turn, acknowledges and celebrates the presence of God.

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The Place of the Teacher

Many teachers wonder how to create community in the "faceless" environment of an online classroom. There are some helpful parallels. Even though Christians have never "seen" Christ's face, He is still very real to them. Similarly, many strong, long-lasting social relationships are based on written correspondence and telephone conversations. In the online context, students frequently testify to rich and meaningful personal exchanges—cognitively, spiritually, and socially—despite the lack of physical contact.

Teachers play a key role in creating a learning community. Their personal qualities (enthusiasm, communication style, spiritual commitment, etc.) have a major impact on students, enabling them to "weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. . . .The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts…the place where *intellect*, *emotion* and *spirit* will converge in the human self."[6]

The quality of those connections will be evident in the life, ethos, and relationships of the learning community. The teacher has the primary responsibility in this area. He or she will need to use a variety of techniques (bulletin boards, chat rooms, telephone conferences, E-mail, listservs) because people react in varying ways to the online environment. Paloff and Pratt have found that "people who are introverts are more adept at creating a virtual environment because they can process information internally and are less outgoing socially. It is more comfortable for an introvert to spend time thinking about information before responding to it. It is more difficult—but not impossible—for extroverts to interact this way, perhaps because they have less need to."[7] Extroverts tend to establish their social presence by talking, laughing, and intuitively reading body language—something that is harder to do in the online space.

Online Learning Communities

Zimmer, Harris, and Muirhead suggest that "An online community has many of the same characteristics as a 'real' community. It offers individual support to its members so that they can feel safe to communicate openly, which in turn allows them to develop the shared vision that they need in order to learn together."[8] Palloff and Pratt say that "in online distance education, attention needs to be paid to developing a sense of community in the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful."[9] Downs describes "online learning" as focusing on content, in contrast with "online communities," which focus on interaction.[10] The challenge is to combine these two ideas, to integrate content and communication so that effective learning takes place.

Picture Removed

In traditional education, the content is dispensed by teachers who are academic experts and who interact "live" with a classroom full of students. However, Palloff and Pratt point out that "teaching in the cyberspace classroom requires that we move beyond traditional models of pedagogy into new practices that are more facilitative."[11] Since online learning takes place more through collaboration, teachers and students can facilitate this by managing the pace of conversations, asking questions, clarifying, summarizing, making

connections between topics, and maintaining a positive tone in the online space.

In order for this level of interaction to occur, teachers and administrators need to address the issue of class size. In the early 1990s, administrators and business people thought online classes would be major cash cows for their institutions, and writers in various publications declared optimistically that cyber-instructors could enroll and teach hundreds of students with minimal time expenditure. Such illusions were rapidly shattered when it became clear that it took just as much, if not more, time to prepare and present instruction, grade papers, and interact with students online as it did in a regular classroom. In her dissertation study of six exemplary online courses, Eggers[12] found that teachers believed the optimal class size was five to 500 (the class with 500 students, however, made provision for students to work in small groups with student mentors for each).

Fifteen to 20 students seems to be an optimal online class size, in order to ensure that interaction is a key element of the class. (Incidentally, standards for online classes consistently identify interaction as a key element in the learning environment.) Larger classes can work if the teacher divides students into smaller groups and uses teaching assistants. Building community in the online course stands or falls on the quality and amount of interaction between teacher and students, and among class members, so teachers must plan for ways to make this occur. One way to do this is to organize the class so that small groups work together and then report back to the class (chat rooms work well for this). Another way is to use peer-review processes for written work.

Moussou and White have identified five key attributes of online communication:

1. Absence of the non-verbal communication cues that are present in face-to-face communication.

2. Impersonality of the medium (distance)—people may be less inhibited by the online "space" and say things they would not say offline.

3. Asynchronicity or time-lag, which affects the way people react to messages—a lack of response or inaccurate perceptions of the writer's attitudes can cloud online communication.

4. Public versus private spaces and perceptions—in the online space, everything seems quite open, yet people have different ideas about what is "public" and what is "private."

5. Limitations of written communication—reading and responding quickly to online posts can lead to misunderstandings.[13]

Some of these seemingly negative attributes can be dealt with by encouraging students to dialogue rather than simply post completed assignments,[14] using emoticons (characters like smiley faces that show the emotion of the sender),[15] offering suggestions for creating excellent questions in the bulletin board space,[16] and studying how to design discussions[17] and facilitate online conversations.[18] Each of these activities helps ensure that this largely text-based medium provides for the social/emotional needs as well as intellectual needs of students. ✐

To read the rest of this article, along with suggestions for creating a learning community online, go to heep://www.avln.org/jae/.

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This article has been peer-reviewed.

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