Collaborating in Electronic Learning Communities

Ava S. Miller EdD

The University of Texas at Brownsville

July 2009

Abstract

There are obvious differences between face-to-face instruction and learning and online instruction and learning. Although collaboration and community building do occur in the campus classroom, as does active learning, it is imperative in an online class. Students today will reluctantly attend classes that consist entirely of faculty lectures and tests. Constructivist strategies are foundational to the suggestions provided that will enhance collaboration and community building in online classes.

There are obvious differences between face-to-face instruction and learning and online instruction and learning. The physical attributes of buildings, classrooms, students and teachers are real and tangible features of a campus based course. Social networks that involve before, during, and after class also exist. Within the online classroom there are no walls but there is a sense of occupancy. Students and faculty do sense each others presence. It is that presence that sets the foundation of the primary difference between online and campus based courses because it is the basis for community building. …"the formation of a learning community through which knowledge is imparted and meaning is co-created sets the stage for successful learning outcomes" (Palloff and Pratt, 2007, p. 4). This paper will look at the characteristics of the online community and the roles of faculty and students in this environment.

<div align="center">The Online Collaborative Community</div>

Learning communities are the natural outcome of active learning where students are free to question, experiment, explore, and manipulate ideas in reality (Paloff and Pratt, 2007). Active learning includes lots of interaction between and among other class participants. Collaborative activities like group projects, simulations, and debates contribute to personal meaning making. The online collaborative community is the essence of Constructivist Theory. In this environment the social construction of knowledge and meaning occurs through interactions with communities of learners. This is in stark contrast to a group of passive learners in an instructor centered campus classroom. By comparison the online collaborative classroom is student centered. In a study by Joyce, Carter-Wells, Glaeser, Ivers, and Street (2006) it was found that a community-centered approach to learning and a constructivist learning environment most supported community development.

The online community is synergistically tied to collaboration. Thru collaboration, Palloff and Pratt, (2005) point out a number of accomplishments: deeper levels of knowledge generation; promotion of initiative, creativity, and critical thinking; creating of a shared goal for learning among students and the formation of the foundation of a learning community; the addressing of all learning styles and culture.

Faculty and Student Roles

The instructor in the online community "models the development of presence through his or her guidance and facilitation of the course, and empowers students to take on the continued job of community building and the exploration of content" (Palloff and Pratt, 2007). The class is skillfully guided in its learning and interactions in community building activities. The technologies available to teachers today allow for variety and innovation in online teaching strategies. When teachers make learning interactive and collaborative by using a social constructivist, student centered, approach to teaching and learning they assume the role of facilitator. Students engage in peer learning in the networked community of learners that focus on reflective thinking (Maor, 2003).

Technical Challenges

Technical problems can bring a course to a halt very quickly or can simply be a minor annoyance. Problems can arise from the administrative point or can be problems that are focused with the faculty or the student. In the case of administrative problems, sometimes nothing can be done. Challenges with budget can prevent an institution from acquiring a platform for course delivery that is optimal. Technical support is often not adequate or may not be advanced to the point it needs to be. In the case of inadequate support, often it surfaces as not being available when needed. Graduate and continuing education courses are often undertaken by working

professionals who complete their coursework on the weekends. Technical support that is not available on weekends is problematic and sadly is often the case in higher education. Faculty must become versed in many of the technical aspects of the course to enable them to provide the needed technical support when necessary. Changing due dates to the middle of the week also assists those students that must access support prior to submitting an assignment when no support is available on weekends. Faculty and students alike feel the impact of institutional allocation of funds to more traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Teachers find it difficult to adopt new online techniques unless external funding exists to support the software and faculty development activities (Davis & Fill, 2007).

Participation Challenges

As much as we encourage students to participate in discussions, even in traditional classrooms, we still have those that are reluctant to contribute. This can be for a variety of reasons. Some of those reasons are diminished in online classes, such as the embarrassment of speaking in front of a large group of classmates, or fears of the reactions of classmates that are usually non-verbal in nature. In the online environment, all students can have a voice and can be required to contribute to a discussion. Students often feel that it is easier in an environment where you are "faceless" and yet participation still can be a challenge.

One strategy for encouraging participation is to begin the collaboration and community building even before the course begins in a virtual discussion area that allows students to introduce themselves. This can build collaboration by students seeing who has similar interests while at the same time providing a safe area to speak and learn the conventions of using a discussion board (Palloff and Pratt, 2007).

Sometimes students come to online courses with the attitude that they are taking courses that can be accomplished without interaction only to find out that collaboration is a part of the course. These students can be difficult to bring to participation. It is important to realize that most students are using online collaboration and communication tools already. They participate in chat areas, discussion boards, blogs and podcasts in a social context. Faculty can pull this technology into the classroom in a way that students will respond to the course content in a way similar to the social content (Bailey and Penney, 2007).

Challenge of Cultural Differences

Cultural differences can become a challenge when the differences are not realized and for which no preparation has been undertaken. Cultural differences can stem from differences in ethnicity and include differences in language usage and customs. In diverse populations of students it is important to encourage students to talk about their culture in introductory ice-breaking activities. Faculty can encourage students to talk about any cultural factors that might influence how they learn and participate. Students should be guided to being sensitive to the needs of all students.

When classes are very diverse it is likely that participants are living all over the world and in widely different time zones. Faculty should be alert to this as students post their introductions and remind students that when doing group projects provisions should be made for time zone differences. Implementing a class that has students from around the globe can be challenging from the technical standpoint, as well, and some technologies may not be available to all students (Beldarrain, 2006),

Faculty need to be aware, also, of inter-generational differences that will drive the design of their courses to some extent. An awareness of the span of ages in a class will help to

determine what kinds of collaborative activities will be most enriching. In this kind of diverse class variety of activities will assure meeting the expectations of most students. Older students may be used to lecture format and expect some knowledge in this format to be provided by the faculty. Younger students will want to acquire knowledge on their own. A suitable compromise might be the use of a mini-lecture at the beginning of each unit as an introduction to the new material.

The challenges presented here are but a few that can complicate an online course. Most challenges can be met with careful planning and networking among students and faculty alike. Faculty awareness of existing, and often persistent, challenges in their educational setting allows for compensation and creative management of those challenges.

Strategies for Building Effective Online Communities

Online communities are characterized and facilitated by activities that cannot be carried out in the campus classroom. Woods and Ebersole (2003) reported that faculty student relationships were more positive when they added non-subject-matter-specific discussion boards in an effort to build connectedness in online learning. These discussion folders helped build a positive faculty-student relationship, positive relationships with fellow students, fostered a greater sense of community, and contributed to a higher degree of satisfaction with the overall learning experience (Woods and Ebersole, 2003).

Another successful strategy for community building is the use of project based learning in online courses. The implementation of project based learning groups, in a study by Murphy and Gazi, 2001, was found to be enabling in students meeting learning objectives and strategies. In addition, it was found that the activities were identified as environments that students viewed as meaningful, collaborative, and enhanced their ability to build skills and knowledge (Murphy

and Gazi, 2001). In a study that included a group of graduate students, it was found that between-groups project-based online courses were collaborative in nature, were effective in improving group processes, group project performance, individual student achievement, and confidence in complex problem solving (Lou, 2004).

Although collaboration and community building do occur in the campus classroom, as does active learning, it is imperative in an online class. Students today will reluctantly attend classes that consist entirely of faculty lectures and tests. In an online class that will not fare so well. Faculty that attempt to recreate their face-to-face classes in an online environment can count on high attrition rate. Students naturally want to socialize and the use of collaborative community building activities and active learning strategies will keep students engaged and satisfied with their learning experience.

References

Bailey, K. & Penney, S. (2007). Don't make me collaborate. *Engaging the learner. Annual instructional technology conference (12th, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, April 1-3, 2007).*

Beldarrain, Y. (2006). Distance education trends: Integrating new technologies to foster student interaction and collaboration. *Distance Education. 27*(2), 139-153.

Davis, H. C. & Fill, K. (2007). Embedding blended learning in a university's teaching culture: Experiences and reflections. *British Journal of Educational Technology. 38*(5), 817-828.

Lee, J., Carter-Wells, J., Glaeser, B., Ivers, K., & Street, C. (2006). Facilitating the development of a learning community in an online graduate program. *Quarterly Review of distance Education, 7*(1), 13-33.

Lou, Y. (2004). Learning to solve complex problems through between-group collaboration in project-based online courses. *Distance Education, 25*(1), 49-66.

Maor, D. (2003). The teacher's role in developing interaction and reflection in an online learning community. *Educational Media International, 40*(1), 127.

Murphy, K. L., & Gazi, Y. (2001). Role plays, panel discussions, and simulations: Project-based learning in a web-based course. *Educational Media International, 38*(4), 261-270.

Palloff, R. & Pratt, K. (2005). *Collaborating online: Learning together in community*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.

Palloff, R. & Pratt, K. (2007). *Building online learning communities: Effective strategies for the virtual classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.

Woods, R., & Ebersole, S. (2003). Using non-subject matter-specific discussion boards to build connectedness in online learning.