

A Brief Learners' Guide to Online Community

Dianne Conrad

Athabasca University

dianneconrad@athabascau.ca

Introduction

This concise guide outlines the building and maintenance of online community. It is followed by references for further reading.

Many important concepts underlying the understanding of online community are reflected in these related assumptions:

- Online learning requires a constructivist, collaborative approach to learning.
- Successful online learning requires the creation of community.
- Online learners perceive the importance of community in different ways.
- Online community requires building, maintaining and constant negotiation among all involved.
- Online learners participate in building and maintaining community in different ways and to different levels.

What is online community?

Online community is a general sense of connection, belonging, and comfort that develops, over time, among members of an online (Internet-based) group who share purpose or commitment to a common goal.

Whose responsibility is it to create online community?

Both learners and instructor(s) should take responsibility for building community. Because individuals respond to the demands of online learning in different ways, and because the collaborative style suggested by online learning suits some learners more than others, learners participate in online community in different ways and to differing levels.

For example, some learners devote many hours to attending to online issues, both academic and social. These learners often post longer responses or messages more quickly and frequently and attend to the “personal” issues that are raised by other learners. These learners also feel more comfortable sharing their own thoughts and feelings online.

Learners feel that instructors should take initial responsibility to foster online community. They are critical of instructors who do not exercise some effort toward the creation of community. When a course is underway, however, learners feel the sense of community

that develops and they assume much of the responsibility for the maintenance of community.

As a learner, how can I contribute to building online community?

These behaviors contribute to community:

- Presence. Online community requires group members' regular and sustained presence. Long absences by group members result in a hollow, "where is everybody?" type of feeling among those who do participate.
- Prepared and relevant postings. Contribute to content-oriented discussions in a constructive and thoughtful style. Focus on the discussion.
- Awareness of individual learning styles. Levels and types of interactions vary among learners and cultures. Be patient with those who require higher levels of interaction than you.
- Respectful behavior. Harsh or critical messages create discomfort among other learners. Learners experiencing discomfort with the online exchanges will often become very quiet and disappear from "public" view, sharing their private opinions only with those online friends with whom they feel closely connected. When this happens, the general level of community, expressed through public postings, decreases.
- Compassion and tolerance. In the classroom, a learner's discomfort is readily noticeable. Because of the asynchronous nature of online learning, however, a colleague whose message expresses doubt or insecurity may go "unheard" until **you** log on. As a member of the group, it may fall to you to offer the assurances needed. A cry for help that is not answered can leave the writer feeling distraught and unhappy. Attentive, caring instructors must be attuned to these kinds of situations but all members of the online group should take responsibility for the well-being of their colleagues.

How will community benefit me as a learner?

Many learners find it difficult to learn at a distance because they are accustomed to face-to-face learning and appreciate seeing other people in a classroom, chatting over coffee, working in groups, etc. While distance learners often experience loneliness and isolation, online learning provides the opportunity to link to other learners for collaborative problem-solving, completing group assignments, and benefiting from learners' collective knowledge and experience. The feelings of belonging that result from shared purpose and interaction serve as motivators for continued learning. The spirit of kinship, and even friendship, that emerges from successful online group interaction often keeps distance learners engaged in and committed to their studies.

Online learning sounds as though it will take a lot of time....

Online learning can be time-consuming. Many learners feel obligated to respond to their colleagues' postings in order to demonstrate a sense of caring as well as to answer content-oriented discussion questions. For learners who are isolated either geographically or socially, the opportunity for interaction with like-minded colleagues provides a sound learning environment. Others must determine for themselves how much time they can reasonably allocate to the online environment.

I am not a very social learner. Can I avoid participating in online community?

It is important to remember that each learner will find his or her own level of comfort as they participate online.

Courses generally clearly stipulate the amount of participation that is required. Some learners' circumstances may make it impossible to contribute more than what is minimally required. However, the opportunity to exchange ideas and share knowledge proves irresistible for other learners.

In situations where learners' online presence extends over several courses or over the period of a year or two during an online program, learners often look forward to the companionship and shared purpose provided by online community.

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