Building an Engaging & Supportive Online Course Community

Rajni Goel
Information Systems and Supply Chain Management
School of Business
Howard University
Agenda

• What is Online Learning Community and Why is it needed
• How does communication lead to community
• Purposefully creating a community of learners through engagement
• What tools can be used to build an Online Learning Community
• Best Practices
• Q&A
Online Learning Community

- Being a member of learning community means engaging in reciprocal learning activities, exchanging ideas perspectives and experiences.
- Learning happens within the community of fellow learners.
- Vygotsky's theories remind us of how much we learn as social beings within a social context.
  - Deliberately creating social moments acknowledges this fundamental aspect
- In face-to-face: Faculty and Students interact and engage
  - Develops intellectual and personal bonds
  - No “before” or “after” class when much of community-building often occurs
  - Also make an online course more than sitting in front of a computer
- The online community is part of what makes this happen.
  - Create the camaraderie that often exists in a traditional classroom
Basics of Online Communities

• More than simply replicating face-to-face activities in front of a webcam or recording a short lecture and publishing it on an educational platform

• You have to be Deliberate – With Intent
  • Classroom interactions happen by proximity in the brick-and-mortar classroom, but in the online classroom

• Set up your course to create a community from the start (Pelikan, 1992).

• Design with a *Balanced set of dialogues* – 3 dialogues
  • faculty to learner (F-L)
  • learner to learner (L-L) online discussion forums, peer-review activities, collaborative work, and video conferencing
  • learner to resource (L-R)

• Learning experiences target all five senses

• Understand proper usage of available online tools for communication to build a community among students - How to choose?
Create a communication plan

• Design a community from the outset by re-engineering, re-thinking, and re-programming your course

• Stimulating all of the senses at once difficult in a digital community
  • Variety - groups/ podcasts/ video etc. increase students’ engagement

• Prepare a new schedule
  • Week 1: Introductions & Virtual Icebreaker
  • Week 2: Establish format of learning modules for remainder of course
  • Schedule a Synchronous Online Meetings – individual or group
  • Weeks 3: Instructor-led Forums
  • Week 4..12: Student-led Forums (Entire Class or Small Groups)/Collaborative Inquiry Projects/ Virtual events
  • Weeks 14-15: Student
Selecting Interaction Tools

• Identify Purpose (What is your desired outcome/goals):
  • a good discussion (Focused, reflection, and encouraging debate).
  • collaboration among students, collaborative teamwork
  • Reflection/ sharing
  • getting help?
  • questions need to be deliberately structured and students need to be directed on how and when to participate.

• Set expectations for the level and extent of the interactions
  • Students need clear directions and motivation
  • Decide if and how the interactions will be graded.
  • Participation in an on-going Discussion Board
  • Students assessed on taking initiative and responsibility to listen, question, and think critically
Timing of Interactions

• Instructor’s plan and requirements for interacting with learners during class are clearly stated:
  • When, Where, How

• Pick the tool that is most appropriate for your goals
  • Discussions, collaborative projects, wikis, blogs, and real time (synchronous) sessions.

• Once you know the kinds on interactions, decide When:
  • Asynchronous advantages
  • Synchronous advantages
  • Combination
  • Spaced evenly throughout a course
    • If 15-week online course there is some interaction occurring every couple of weeks instead of all happening in the first 2-3 weeks of class.
Tactics for Engagement

• Make yourself available

• Planned Engagement and Interaction
  • **Synchronous Tools** Blackboard is amazing!!!
    • Synchronous meetings serve a very important community building and logistical purpose. Polls!
    • Do not try to cover too much curriculum or do too much teaching during this time
  • **Asynchronous Tools**
    • Personal introduction posting - or icebreaker activity,
    • Encourage the use of a general open student forum for students to post and request help and assistance from each other

• **Study groups**
  • Divide a larger class into small groups
  • Students can depend on for supportive networking or mentoring, help in identifying resources or clarifying key points of a class assignment.
  • To improve the learning experience
Blackboard Tools Demonstrated

• https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Interact

Tactics for Engagement (continued)

“In” class tools - Empower learners

• Encouraging students to reach out to classmates with similar life circumstances can be a first step to building relationships in the online environment
• communal discussion boards,
• group projects/Student presentation
• hosting online group study sessions – establish crowd-sourced notes
• Wikis - Learners contributing their knowledge by making resources
• peer review groups.
Tactics for Engagement (continued)

Build “outside class” spaces for Informal Interaction

- ‘Students’ Cafe” or “Water Cooler” section- informal interactions beyond course content
- Promote a more relaxed environment and plan some lighter activities for students to enjoy
- Attend a virtual event together and discuss it afterwards.
- Bring the outside in
  - Speakers, videos
Make it a Social Community

Creating social spaces for students
• Sharing and commenting on content
• Gamification, this makes any course more interactive.
• use of games, contests, and trivia questions to keep students engaged.
• It’s a lot of fun for the learners!
• Let people choose the way
# Table of Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Community Building</th>
<th>Desired Outcome</th>
<th>WHEN to do Interactions</th>
<th>Tool(s)</th>
<th>HOW</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty -to -Learner (F-L)</td>
<td>Presenting and sharing, Giving help/office hours, Feedback/Assessment</td>
<td>Flexible/ As per students energy/time, Or Realtime, spontaneous, presence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learner -to -Learner (L-L)</td>
<td>Debating, Discussion/Conversation, Collaboration, Socializing, peer learning</td>
<td>More thoughtful, complete, reflective, See all students’ responses, In Class, Out of class</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty -to -Learner (L-R)</td>
<td>Facilitate connection to Content, Gamification</td>
<td>Asynchronous</td>
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Managing Routine Administrative Tasks For Community Building

• Set a specific time to accomplish these tasks daily.

• Examples include:
  • Establish and maintain regular online office hours – Set times where students can make contact via chat, telephone, and web-based
  • Check content area discussion forums for new posts (Track participation over time)
  • Check social discussion threads/private discussion forums and e-mails
  • Provide individualized feedback (acknowledgments)

• Engagement with "outside" of Class resources with whom you are connecting to your students..
The Best Practices

1. Create a supportive online course community.
2. Be present at the course site.
3. Develop a set of explicit expectations for your learners and yourself as to how you will communicate and how much time students should be working on the course each week.
4. Use a variety of large group, small group, and individual work experiences.
5. Use synchronous and asynchronous activities.
6. Ask for informal feedback early in the term.
7. Prepare discussion posts that invite responses, questions, discussions, and reflection.
8. Search out and use content resources that are available in digital format if possible.
10. Plan a good closing and wrap activity for the course.
Conclusions

• Not all learners will respond to these strategies for encouraging the building of a learning community.
  • Some students may choose not to participate very actively at all; others find it is the best way for them to learn.
  • Those who need it, it is an essential part of how they learn.

• Being deliberate, consistent, and relentless
  • Helps students to connect with not only with the course materials, but with one another.
References


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