Building Community: Fact or Fiction?

by Masterworks Study Group

Effective education, whether in a face-to-face classroom or in an online environment, must not be a unilateral flow of information from instructor to student. Instead, it demands an interactive discussion between members of a community - in short, effective two-way communication.

In a live setting, instructors have a variety of techniques at their disposal to help build a sense of community; these include verbal discussions, in-class activities and the ability to pick up and immediately respond to a variety of non-verbal clues. However, the remote nature of the online format does not permit such an immediate response. We therefore need to rethink how we can create dynamic situations to ensure that communication exists.

The first step we can take is to lead by example - to communicate effectively with the members of our class. We can accomplish this in a number of ways:

1.   By welcoming welcome students into our (and their) classroom, introducing both ourselves and the course (nature and scope) before we begin.
2.   By discussing not only the course's requirements, but our expectations, right up front; that way there will be no room for misunderstanding on either side.
3.   By stressing the importance of thinking critically and asking questions.
4.   And perhaps most importantly, by indicating to each student how he fits into the big picture. Every student brings a unique background and experience to the online environment; students need to be aware that these are important qualities and that you will integrate them into the instruction of the course.

The more we can involve students in the process of learning, the greater their sense of community will be.

Building a Community

Communities are not just an abstract concept; they must be grounded in the real world. To create such concrete, functional communities we need to answer 4 major questions: What will students learn and take away from the course? How will they accomplish this learning? How will the course objectives be measured? And how will students be evaluated?

What will students learn?

Students attending an online course have at least one thing in common - they are there to learn about a particular topic, whether it's Web design, business writing or gardening. We therefore need to design our courses so that students take away as much content information as possible, within the scope of the class's duration. This information should include not just simple facts, but a perspective on how students can integrate these facts with other topics, as well as a curiosity to investigate the material further once the course is through.

In addition, by fostering a sense of community, the students will obtain real-world experience in the areas of listening, discussion and feedback. These are all critical to the communicating experience, not just for the course itself, but for any other endeavor they pursue.

<div align="center">How will students learn?</div>

It is reasonable to assume that some of the participants will have taken online courses before, while for others this will be their first experience. It is imperative, therefore, that during (or before) the initial phases of Week 1 the instructor facilitates a discussion among the students about their experience and their comfort level with the technology. The more comfortable the students are with the technology, with the instructor and with each other, the greater their willingness will be to participate.

Once the course begins, the instructor can design the presentation not only to impart the material, but to foster the growing sense of community. Some ways to accomplish this include:

1. Mandatory group discussions. These should not merely be students replying to an instructor's posting, but students responding to each other's comments and generating their own discussion topics. Again, the more involved they feel with the process, the more likely they are to participate and to learn the material.

2. Tasks that require feedback. One of the essential components of effective communication is feedback. The students must have tasks that require them to their own documents, to solicit feedback and to critique other students' work constructively.

3. Group projects. An effective way to foster community is to create study groups that require each student to play a role in the learning process. Ideally the instructor should form the groups according to the students' backgrounds - for example, each group should contain someone with technical expertise, someone who's a writer, someone who's entirely new to the online experience, etc. That way each person has something vital to contribute to the group as a whole. In addition, each group can be given a part of a large project that they need to develop and post. Once they have completed the assignment, they should then be required to evaluate the other modules, again reinforcing the importance of discussion and constructive feedback.

<div align="center">How will we measure objectives?</div>

Both the instructor and the students must be responsible for measuring the course objectives, which should include clear-cut assignments, grading rubrics and instructor/student expectations. All of these must be presented and discussed right from the beginning so there are no surprises toward the end of the course.

In addition, the instructor should solicit questions at all times, with the understanding that there is no such thing as a stupid question, just one you to which you don't know the answer. The questions themselves can provide the instructor with critical information mid-stream about whether the objectives are being met, and they once again give the students an opportunity to become part of the process.

How will the students and the course be evaluated?

    Clear-cut assignments and grading rubrics provide objective measures of the success and failure. In addition, a course evaluation presented at/after the last session can offer important information about what aspects of the course work and which need to be improved for the next round of students.

    However, knowing what to improve for next time does not address the issue of effective learning and communication for the class at hand, nor does it help build an online community. One way to remedy this situation is to include interim evaluations at the end of each unit. These would allow the students to evaluate the class and their performance as they go; the instructor to derail any problems before they become too entrenched to solve; and both the instructor and the students to gain a perspective of how each topic relates to the overall objectives of the course.

Fact or Fancy

    Online communities are not a fancy. However, they require a large degree of participation from both the instructor and the students in order to work, and all parties must understand this right from the beginning. Effective education is effective communication, and the more all parties communicate, the more productive each and every online course will be.