Chapter 14
Designing Blended Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT
This chapter seeks to highlight the unique characteristics of blended learning communities and the special design consideration they call for. The blended nature of a community is reflected through the interplay of the online and offline dimensions of a community and the mix of various media in support of community-wide interaction. The authors introduce the notion of blended learning community based on related literature on learning community and blended learning and put forward design guidelines for building such communities. Further, a pilot study was conducted to test out the proposed design principles in the context of pre-service teacher education with blogs as the main vehicle for online communication. The authors’ work can contribute to a deepened understanding of learning communities situated in the blended media environment and provide a set of design principles for their development.

INTRODUCTION
Increasingly, the Internet has permeated every fiber of our daily lives and society at large. It has become a common practice for a co-located community to employ both online and offline media to maintain group connections and interaction. However, we still have relatively limited understanding as to the interplay between the online and offline dimensions of a community (Haythornthwaite & Nielsen, 2007).

In this chapter, we seek to address this knowledge gap by focusing on the design issues for cultivating blended learning communities. Such an endeavor highlights the dynamic interplay of the online and physical dimensions of a community and brings to attention the challenges of creating synergies among various educational media.

In this chapter, the blended nature of a community is reflected and addressed in two ways: the first concerns the integration of the online and offline dimensions of a learning community. In particular, our research attention centers on blended communi-
ties stemming from physical ones. As such, the purpose of this chapter is to propose a number of design guidelines on how to extend offline communities to online space. The other aspect of blended communities deals with the mixture of multiple media in support of community-wide interaction. The proliferation of web-based technology poses a daunting challenge for educators to make appropriate selection and mix of different educational media. In this circumstance, a better understanding of the characteristics and values of new media becomes vital. Finally, we will chart out areas for attention when making sensible choice or mix of educational media in support of a blended learning community.

This chapter is structured as follows: first, we outline current research and practice in the area of learning community and blended learning to set a stage for the advent of the key concept - blended learning community. Then, drawing on general guidelines of building online communities proposed by Preece (2000), we delineate specific guidelines for building blended learning. Next, we report a pilot study conducted in the context of pre-service education where blogs were used to maintain social connections, promote reflection and peer support among student teachers. At last, the implications of our work and future trends in the field of blended learning communities are put into perspective.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Learning Community

Rooted in social learning theories, learning community has become an increasingly popular notion in schools at all levels. It has been widely documented that learning communities have positive influence upon students’ academic performance and school experiences (e.g. Zhao & Kuh, 2004). To begin with, one essential question that needs to be addressed is what constitutes a learning community? Deng and Yuen (2007) mapped out the structure of an online community and put interaction at the heart of community-based activities. Unlike casual and random online communications, interaction within a community is constant and continual (Conrad, 2005) with multiple members involved in two-way communications (Jones, 1997). On account that learning is social as well as intellectual (Dede, 1996), social interaction alone is not sufficient to ensure purposeful reflection and critical discourse vital for active learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Thus, at the heart of a learning community is an interactive process that engages students in social interaction and critical discourse.

A meaningful learning experience in a community context has two implications: “the first is to construct meaning from a personal perspective. The second is to refine and confirm this understanding collaboratively within a community of learners” (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 13). As such, “the right balance and blend of collaborative and individual learning activities is the key ingredient” (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 24) in a learning community. Therefore, the construction of a learning community calls for two sets of balance: 1) balance between individual and collaborative learning; and 2) balance between social interaction and critical discourse.

Blended Learning

In the educational context, technology is increasingly integrated into the infrastructure and daily practice of schools. The importance of technology in the educational realm has been widely accepted and E-learning has become a worldwide trend. Generally speaking, there are three modes of E-learning: technology-enhanced, blended and online mode (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Papastergiou, 2006). Blended learning that utilizes computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools to support face-to-face (F2F) instruction has become the most pervasive paradigm (Bonk, Kim
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