Chapter 17

Building Virtual Communities: Can We Talk?

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ABSTRACT

Communication deepens learning and builds community. Online classes are built around text-based discussions, and while studies show that students are learning, students do not feel connected in this type of environment. In order to bridge this gap, instructors must use technology and new approaches to build a sense of community and connection. This chapter examines the benefits of and challenges to online discussion and provides solutions to improve interactivity.

INTRODUCTION

Studies show that when students interact with each other (Zakaria, Chin, & Daud, 2010) and with the instructor, learning improves (Gokhale, 1995; Zhao, Lui, Lai, & Tan, 2005). In particular, in-class discussions create opportunities for students to examine material and form new connections with it, making discussions an integral part of the education process (Bruffee, 1984; Dixson, 2010; Larson & Keiper, 2002; Blumenfeld, Kempler, & Krajcik, 2006). Nagel, Blignaut and Cronjé (2009), found a strong positive relationship between discussion participation and grades. When interaction occurs regularly, a learning community is created that connects students to content through collaborative communication. In traditional, on-campus classrooms, the formation of learning communities occurs naturally, as students chat with each other and the instructor, engage in topical discussions, and form study groups. This is not necessarily the case in online classes, however.

Both students and faculty voice concerns about online communication between the two groups, wondering if students can be socialized to the college experience in an online classroom,
and students expressing similar concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty (Ouzts, 2006). Student burnout and feelings of isolation can both be attributed to a low sense of classroom community and may also be a factor in retention in online classes (Bambara, Harbour, Davies, & Athey, 2009; Rovai & Jordan, 2004), where dropout rates are significantly higher than for traditional classes (Carr, 2000; Lynch, 2001). What is more, some students perceive that they learn more in traditional classes (Rovai & Barnum, 2003); while others perceive that the medium has little effect on their learning (Tesone & Ricca, 2008). Numerous studies indicate that student performance is similar in fully online and face-to-face classes (Bernard et al., 2004; Cavus & Ibrahim, 2007; Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006) and courses that blend online features into traditional courses create the most successful situation for students (Boyle, Bradley, Chalk, Jones, & Pickard, 2003; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006; U.S. Department of Education [USDE], Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, 2009; Verduin & Clark, 1991).

A recent meta-analysis of postsecondary online education, sponsored by the United States Department of Education (USDE) in 2009, suggested that online courses may actually be superior to traditional face-to-face courses. However, a careful scrutiny of the USDE report found that while the meta-analysis included 51 studies, not all of them were adequate for the comparison. In fact, only 28 of the studies compared face-to-face classes with those taught solely online. The remaining 23 studies were from blended courses, which are structured similarly to face-to-face courses, with the addition of an online element. In addition, over half of the studies used to compare the face-to-face instruction to online instruction were brief educational lessons, some as short as 15 minutes, which are not directly comparable to semester-long courses (Jaggars and Bailey, 2010). These findings have put the recent USDE study, which has been often cited as evidence that online education can be superior to traditional education, in a new light (Wojciechowska, 2010).

Another factor to consider when examining online courses are concerns that low-income and lower-achieving students may struggle with online classes due to a lack of access to a reliable high-speed Internet connection (Rainie, Estabrook, & Witt, 2007) as well as a lack of needed social and psychological skills, including the ability to ask for help and to be self-motivated (Liu et al., 2007), both of which contribute to success in online classes. Additionally, Figlio, Yin and Rush (2010) found that Hispanic, male and low-achieving students were more likely to do well in a class presented via live lectures than one in which the same lectures were presented over the Internet.

Online courses can provide many different opportunities for participation, including synchronous and asynchronous instructor-lead discussions, informal chat sessions, discussion forums, group work, and visits to supplemental websites, including social media sites. Often the instructor sets criteria for what constitutes successful participation (i.e.: a minimum word count for posts, content expectations, number of posts per thread, etc.), and participation does increase when students receive credit for doing so.

Interestingly, students who sense classroom community in face-to-face courses (McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk & Schweitzer, 2006) and online classes perceive that they have learned more (Rovai, 2002), and are more satisfied with the instructor (Richardson & Swan, 2003). While the formation of community through discussion is a key part of the online experience, community does not form naturally or without intervention. Furthermore, if classroom community is not developed, it can influence student and faculty perceptions of learning success and create feelings of isolation among students (Orvis & Lassiter, 2006; Rovai & Wighting, 2005).
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