

Building Learning Communities in Online Classes
Roundtable Session
Friday, April 24th 1:00 – 1:50
Notes from the Session

What are some benefits from building a learning community in an online class?

- You gain 30 new instructors. Students who are engaged as a learning community will share what they are learning with each other and help each other to build a community of knowledge.
- In a supportive community students tend to gain more confidence.
- The socializing aspect of a learning community helps to make the experience of being in an online class a little more comforting as opposed to the feeling of being isolated and alone when no sense of community is felt.

What are some ways to help build a sense of community in an online class?

- Use of the Chat Room tool. The real-time interaction helps students to feel less alone.
- Setting aside a place in the Discussion area, such as a Student Lounge forum, where students can exchange messages unrelated to the course content. Whether or not the instructor participates or even reads this forum is a personal decision.
 - Some instructors feel it is necessary to set aside a place that is for the students only—where the instructor never goes in to read the messages. When used this way it is important to let students know from the start that the instructor will never go in there to read messages, so it is not a place to ask questions about the course content.
 - Other instructors felt uncomfortable about including an unmonitored space in the class site. They felt that it was important to monitor the Student Lounge area to check for students asking about the course content and to make sure that there was no false or misleading information being passed around.

What are ways that you can structure assignments or other activities to encourage students to build community?

- Sometimes community develops on its own when assignments are difficult and students then turn to each other for support or help.
- Peer focus on assignments or tasks can help build community.
- Setting a tone from the outset of the course that makes the learning environment a friendly and comfortable place can help to open the door for community building.
- Being selective in how you word things, such as using the word “you” can help students feel a more involved in the content and help engender reflection. In a Discussion when students are able to reflect and bring personal experiences into their posts it often leads to a building of community from that vicariously shared experience.
- Including group activities can help promote a sense of community.
- In technical courses, where students are learning computer skills, students can be taught how to use free screen capture tools such as Jing (<http://www.jingproject.com/>) or CamStudio (<http://camstudio.org/>) to share and support each others learning. Using these free tools they can capture their onscreen activity, save it, and post a link to it in an online discussion where their peers can view it.

How much structure should we provide for building of community and is it okay for some students to not participate in the class community?

- Not all students have the same needs for being a part of a learning community and can make good progress without that support. If students are progressing well, they should not be coerced into participating nor should they be penalized for not participating.
- Some students may be participating in a silent way, such as lurking in discussions and getting a lot out of them. You just may not notice their participation in this way.
- Too much structure has the potential to be stifling. If the structure you have designed does not make sense to the students or seems too rigid it might inhibit the growth of a learning community.