Online Tutoring e-Book

Editor Carol Higgison

Chapter 3
Building an Online Community

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Preface

Building an online learning community was one of the key objectives of the OTiS e-Workshop[1]. We wanted to build a learning community of online practitioners (academics, faculty, lecturers, instructors, staff developers, facilitators and trainers) from education and business who could learn from each other. The success of the e-workshop was due to the interest and enthusiasm of the participants and their generosity and willingness to share their experiences and expertise. We hope that the participants in the e-workshop agree that they became part of an active and supportive online learning community.

One of the key characteristics of such a community identified in this chapter is the existence of shared common goals. One of our goals in the e-workshop was to identify and document our experiences of effective practices though sharing stories (case studies) and discussion.

This chapter is a direct result of the creation of that learning community and striving towards this common goal. Our success in achieving it is due to the drive and commitment of the participants.

Three participants from the e-workshop, Bob Zimmer, Rachel Harris and Brent Muirhead, authored this chapter giving freely of their time and effort. Two of them are based in the UK and the third is based in the USA. Their efforts were entirely voluntary and the collaboration was achieved without them ever meeting.

My sincere thanks to all the participants and, in particular, the authors whose commitment extended long beyond the end of the e-workshop.

Carol Higgison
(editor)

The Online Tutoring Skills Project is funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council.

[1] The OTiS International e-Workshop on Developing Online Tutoring Skills was held between 8–12 May 2000. It was organised by Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh and The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, UK.

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Bob Zimmer, Rachel Harris and Brent Muirhead

1 Introduction

One of the central themes of the OTiS International e-Workshop was how to build an online learning community. This chapter draws on almost two hundred ideas and experiences relevant to building online communities that are dispersed throughout the sixty-five case studies and twenty discussion groups from this online conference. It weaves them together into a single narrative and presents them in two main parts.

- Online learning communities: what they are, what they do and how they do it.
- How students and tutors can help an online learning community to emerge.

The majority of examples and discussions refer to online communities mediated by asynchronous, text based methods with some use of synchronous, text based techniques including real time chats and MOOs (MultiUser Object Oriented systems).

The contributions for the content are drawn mainly from e-workshop sources. References given without dates are references to conference contributions: either case study contributions or discussion group contributions, details for which are given in the appendix. The letter 'D' designates discussion group references.

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Online learning communities: what are they, what they do and how they do it.

Online learning communities and the educational possibilities that they create are attracting a lot of attention. This part addresses three key questions about online learning communities (Sections 2–4).

- What are they?
- What do they do?
- How do they work?

2 What is an online learning community?

Successful online learning communities have many of the same characteristics as 'real' communities. Often what links people together in real communities is geography and solidarity or community of interests, a belief that the learning community is important, and a commitment to it. It would be good to replicate what is good about these 'real' communities into an online learning community. (Banks-D)

The learning community exists in the minds of those who participate in it. David McConnell (2000) writes about this in his book *Implementing Computer Supported Cooperative Learning*. Howard Rheingold (2000) also writes about it in *Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. (Banks-D)

3 What does an online learning community do?

An online learning community overcomes barriers of time, distance and place, although for many undergraduates these barriers do not exist (Banks-D). It builds relationships, respect and caring amongst its members (Janes-D).

It works best when learners are sharing ideas and experience and adult learners may be more motivated to do this than undergraduates aged eighteen to twenty-one (Banks-D).

Participating in an online learning community has an impact on a 'real' community. It creates a real bond, and a learning community can be very liberating, as it is possible to say and be things online that you cannot say face-to-face because of the formality of tutorials. (Banks-D)

Starting online has helped folks leap past their accustomed interaction patterns, especially with respect to forming a group, not fall into accustomed ruts or habits. If we then have an opportunity for face-to-face meetings], they are very rich with lots of "it is so great to meet you in real life!" (White-D)

Indeed, we may be moving towards the ultimate seamlessness, where we study and learn and interact in physical and virtual spaces without thinking about how we do it ... taking the best from both worlds (Janes-D).

4 How does an online learning community do it?

How does learning take place within it? How does it develop as a community in itself?

4.1 How does learning take place in online communities?

In essence, learning takes place through collaboration and through writing and question formation.

4.1.1 Learning through collaboration

The learning community can be a collaboration among students working on their assignments (Banks-D).

"I put this course online because I wanted to … move away from the tutor who had knowledge to a far more process oriented course, which is where I think online is really strong. The online course has been about [*sharing the*] learning process, with students who have developed knowledge and synthesis that I do not have. Not a problem for me and I hope not a problem for them. Online learning requires us to rethink where we get knowledge from, while the community involves what we do with that knowledge and how we share it." (Rosie-D)

4.1.2 Learning through writing and question formation

A question composed in written form helps the person who asks it to understand his/her question better and thereby contributes to the learning process (Doufexopoulou-D).

Students emailing professors with their questions can formulate more reflective questions that are relevant to the subject matter (Muirhead-D).

Asynchronous communication is often about communication that may take on the shape of a conversation but is done with the benefit of reflection and typed information. So if you are better able to express yourself in print rather than in person, it is possible that you end up better able to deal with learning and teaching online than in the classroom. (Finkelstein-D).

4.2 How does an online learning community develop?

Community organisers now realise that the original view of "if you build it they will come" does not work (White and Moussou).

It is well established that people need individual support, open communication and shared vision in order to do things together (Adair 1983). Good leaders therefore foster all three within a group, ie giving attention to individual, team and task.

Moreover, since people need a sense of support in order to take on new challenges (Smith 1980), a stronger statement can be made: namely that people need ***enough*** individual support, so that they feel safe ***enough*** to engage in open communication, so that they can arrive at ***enough*** shared vision, to be able to do things together.

People in online communities are no exception. An online learning community develops when its members experience enough individual support, open communication and shared vision to be able to learn together.

4.2.1 Individual support

It can be important for a tutor to consider students as being friends who are worthy of being treated as equals (Muirhead-D).

Online students relate horrible feelings of emptiness when a tutor fails to give them any feedback. "By not responding, the tutor … [*makes*] it difficult for the learner to know if he or she has the right idea from the readings. Non-responsiveness also intimidates the learner and increases the feelings of isolation that are prevalent in online course work." (Muirhead-D)

4.2.2 Open communication (socialisation)

A project that studied the socialisation habits of online learners over the age of eighteen found that students using the internet were significantly more likely to have a vibrant social life (Janes-D).

"The most important experience for the lecturers and the participants was the acceptance of a learning community as a two way street – there was a blurring of the roles of teacher and learner". (Gwynne and Chester).

At the beginning

The socialisation process is crucial at the beginning of teaching online courses for creating the motivated online learner (Finkelstein-D).

Socialising at the beginning of a course is important: we like to know about the people we are interacting with! But ongoing interaction, which can often be quite short, is really important, especially in terms of responding to ideas or material (Rosie-D).

Socialisation can be enabled by setting up the community in a way that allows individuals to gain an understanding of who is addressing them in what can be an impersonal textual environment. This could include: photos, resumes and biographies and general introductions to the online group (Finkelstein-D).

For most people it takes time to find a 'voice' in a learning community (Banks-D).

The tutor has to be careful not to 'invade' the online space of groups of learners. The socialisation process helps because the tutor can socialise in the learning community along with the students. (Banks-D)

In the middle

I think in online learning we often think carefully about our examples and need to talk to people in a social way for reassurance (Rosie-D).

Often the stimulus for reflection and action research is social interaction. Social interaction can be really motivating, because students feel very supported by their fellow learners. (Banks-D)

The bulletin board became a means of communication among students once they went out ... Even though all students were placed in the same middle school, they immediately experienced the isolation, which characterises … teaching. (Hird)

Having formed an online connection, learners can get used to the idiosyncrasies of some communicators and learn how to interpret their communication (Finkelstein-D).

At the end

"Recently, contributions to threads have dwindled and become more social. Perhaps that is because it is near the end and it is a good way to end." (Rosie-D)

"The last chat is to provide closure, real time 'good byes' and 'thank yous'." (White and Moussou)

4.2.3 Shared vision

Shared vision can be provided both by tutors and by students.

"Collaborative group tasks that are of real and direct benefit to the participants are motivating and create a sense of community." (Noakes)

Provided by tutors

Assessment and Learning outcomes can be crucial (Rosie-D).

Doran (2000) provides an interesting example of how a tutor can set the ground rules from the start of a course, and indicate that the students should establish their own (Banks-D).

Ownership is strengthened when:

- members are recognised upon entry and their contributions are acknowledged (reciprocity) (White-D, Zimmer and Alexander),
- community norms and covenants are clearly expressed, sometimes articulated and agreed upon by the members (White-D),
- cycles of activities are respected and "sometimes the establishment of beginning/middle/end helps give form to interactions which otherwise get diffuse or die out. This leads to the growth and 'evolution' of the group." (White-D).

A good reference is Amy Jo Kim's book, *Community Building on the Web*. An interview with Amy Jo Kim is available at http://www.fullcirc.com/community/ajkim.htm (White, 1999).

Provided by students

A community thrives and grows when it has shared purpose and the members find more value in participating than in leaving. Ownership, both individually and collectively, is one way to express that shared purpose, which is being able to articulate 'what is in it for me?' (White-D)

Discussions become active and productive when students themselves identify a real task of direct benefit to them (Higgison).

One of the most exciting things is when communities change; they may get stuck for a bit but turn into something very different from the outset (Rosie-D).

How students and tutors can help an online learning community to emerge

Online learning communities emerge when students and tutors exhibit their capabilities and their needs for learning, collaboration and structure. e-Workshop conference participants have found certain practices to be very helpful for enabling this to happen, and some to be vital.

This part looks at what students can do and what they need to receive in order to do it (Section 5) and then at what tutors can do to help them and what tutors need to receive in order to do that (Section 6).

5 Students

Students have their own capabilities and their own needs.

5.1 Student capabilities

Students are capable of learning, collaborating and creating structure for themselves.

5.1.1 Student capabilities for learning

Students prefer complex questions, problem solving questions, questions that demand creativity and questions that allow them to share their professional knowledge and experience (Muirhead-D).

“Learners can act as tutors for one another easily if they follow the three Rogerian communication principles, ie if they offer their individual creative insight, their receptiveness and their understanding to one another and avoid imposing dogmatic, judgemental demand. They can learn how to use these principles themselves if they are shown how. But they are less likely to be able to help one another to learn how to do it.” (Zimmer and Alexander)

5.1.2 Student capabilities for collaborating

Different personality types in students can be identified (Whittington and Dewar). Feeling types go for informal conference areas, creating relationships (Whittington and Dewar). They form support and self-help groups (Higgison). Thinking types attend more to ideas and concepts (Whittington and Dewar). Play by both types can be an important part of online community building and identity formation (Gwynne and Chester). The level of student confidence has a direct bearing on their willingness to take risks and share knowledge with others (Muirhead-D).

Students can be good at showing creativity and creative receptiveness toward one another, but not generally at showing the full triad of creative, receptive understanding toward one another (Zimmer and Alexander).

Nevertheless, when commitment to the community is high, antisocial behaviour is infrequent (Gwynne and Chester).

Many of the students evidenced a strong sense of community in the subject and these social, playful places seemed to be important in facilitating the development of that community (Gwynne and Chester).

5.1.3 Student capabilities for creating structure

Online students moved easily out of firmly held scripts that normally governed their behaviour in class (Gwynne and Chester).

The group area allowed students to set up friendship 'study groups' … which helped facilitate more private discussions (McFarlane).

Students are creating 'new' knowledge based on their collective iterations. Hopefully this can be self-managed by them. (Banks-D).

5.2 Student needs

Students have particular needs in their learning, needs in their collaboration and needs for structure.

5.2.1 Student needs for learning

Students need to understand constructivist learning in order to manage it for themselves (Salter).

"Students who did not know … tried more 'private' one-to-one communication with the facilitator… This simply resulted in a reply from him to the entire list each time so learners soon learnt that they may as well share all issues with everyone … which was his goal all along … based on his constructivist philosophy." (Clarke)

If they are to learn how to function effectively as mutually supportive tutors for one another, they need to learn how to show the full Rogerian triad of creative, receptive understanding toward one another and, preferably, the more powerful triad of understanding, creative receptiveness (Zimmer and Alexander).

5.2.2 Student needs for collaboration

Rogers (1993): Only within trusting, real and empathic relationships can true education take place (Whittington and Dewar). Students need a safe learning environment (Juwah) filled with receptiveness, understanding and creative insight (Zimmer and Alexander).

- Receptiveness: They expect to have their autonomy respected (Ewing).
- Understanding: Each needs to know that you know who they are, where they are, how they are doing (Higgison).
- Creative insight: "many … need a sense of 'who the other person is' before feeling comfortable about contributing to discussion" (Phillips).

Otherwise they can become discouraged by … comments from others (Muirhead).

Students lack skills in the management of online collaboration (Macdonald). "Many postings were self-contained, rather than responses to other postings or dialogues, and some students contributed heavily to the discussions while others did very little. This resulted in fewer opportunities for students to learn from each other's experiences and insights … which are valuable parts of any class . . ." (Neal)

Given principles of online facilitation, they tend to try to impose the principles on themselves and one another, which is not facilitative behaviour and which means that they may be able to 'talk the talk', but without special training they can not actually 'walk the walk' (Zimmer and Alexander). As a first step, they can learn online facilitation only from tutors who themselves 'walk the walk' (Salter).

5.2.3 Student needs for structure

Students need a vision of what an online learning community is, including ground rules for netiquette, flaming, valuing responses, and encouraging. These need not determine the community. (Rosie-D).

"Interaction is promoted by advising students of the PACE principles (Participation, Addition, Constructive criticism, and Encouragement)." (Kennedy and Duffy)

Students themselves have ideas for improving interactivity (Muirhead-D):

- timely and informative tutor feedback,
- student accountability for keeping up with discussions,
- more intellectually challenging and open ended discussion questions,
- integrating more group projects and chat sessions into online classes,
- more learner centred activities,
- more personalised contact with tutors to humanise classes (eg email comments that reveal the tutor's personality),
- students having a greater influence on course direction,
- tutors who are teachable and willing to learn from their students.

Students can be said to need safety, personal space, pacing and assessment.

Safety

The online classroom levels the playing field for introverted types; they do not have to fight or wait for their turn to speak (Whittington and Dewar, Gwynne and Chester). Some people prefer online communication to face-to-face communication and are better at it; for them, it is a whole new world and they discover new things about themselves online (Banks-D).

Some hate it, though, and cannot be natural (Banks-D), but regular, scheduled face-to-face meetings can help to maintain personalisation (Ewing, Finkelstein) and asynchronicity improves collaboration by providing time for contemplation (Kulp, Neal).

Personal space

An environment is needed in which students can discuss development of their own identities (and management issues) without feeling inhibited (Rosie and Thompson). A play area can be vital for enabling them to make mistakes without 'losing face' in learning to use the software (White and Moussou).

Pacing

Pace the course to the rhythms of distributed learning. Team activities … take extra time and effort … when moving online we need to rethink the time the learning activities will take (Kulp).

"A commonly used rule of thumb is that each day in the classroom translates into a week. Online…courses that last more than three or four weeks lose momentum." ((Kulp, 1999) quoted in Kulp)

Students can need constant reminding of schedule requirements (Ewing). But their fatigue can be an important factor, especially after the third week of an online course (White and Moussou).

Assessment

Students can appreciate having their participation assessed, because it ensures that all will participate (Macdonald). They can benefit also from assessment of the degree to which they are achieving their own goals (Labour, Rosie and Thompson). But exams do not necessarily help them (or tutors, for that matter) to gauge their progress (Neal).

6 Tutors

Tutors also have their own capabilities and their own needs.

6.1 Tutor capabilities

Tutors are capable of facilitating learning, facilitating collaboration and providing structure.

6.1.1 Tutor capabilities for facilitating learning

Tutors can facilitate learning by pulling (extending invitations), pushing (imposing requirements) and avoiding (carefully not doing certain things).

By pulling (extending invitations)

Tutors can invite students to use resources, to participate in discussions, and to take up training to act as tutors for one another.

1. **Resources**

   It can help if resources and reading are provided to students "and which are supplemented and enhanced by discussions, small team projects, assignments, and exams. The goal is to help working professionals understand what is interesting, important, and relevant about a topic and understand how it does or can impact their jobs." (Neal)

   Giving students greater and greater decision making power as they progress sets them up for lifelong learning (Labour).

2. **Discussions**

   Responding to threads and knowing when and how best to respond is vital. In some ways, this is harder in asynchronous communication because it is a judgement as to whether it is the right time to summarise and move on. In synchronous communication it is easier to sound out, gauge the feel and respond appropriately to threads.

   In asynchronous communication, a tutor can stand back, but still has to evaluate where the thread is and ensure there is something helpful for the next person contributing, not necessarily a tutor comment (preferably not) but a student one. (Rosie-D)

   Tutor feedback has to be relevant. It needs to demonstrate that the tutor has followed the particular discussion and can add something that is relevant, but which also moves the discussion on. This may be with comments based on expert knowledge or summarising or directing discussion to another resource. (Banks-D)

   Specifically, one of the most powerful things a tutor can do to facilitate online learning is to engage in conceptual 'weaving'. This involves gathering together ideas that students have been coming out with, synthesising them in some creative way, and then inviting students to comment on the synthesis. (Feenberg 1989, Mason and Kaye 1989)

   In Rogerian terms, this means starting at the point of response to what students have been saying and showing understanding, creative receptiveness. This is a much more powerful technique than just showing creative, receptive understanding, which students can mistake for a discussion terminating summary. (Zimmer and Alexander)

3. Training

Tutors can provide students with guidelines to support online interaction, eg the PACE principles: Participation, Addition, Constructive criticism, and Encouragement (Kennedy and Duffy).

Tutors can help students to learn how to be facilitative tutors for one another, by using the full Rogerian triad of creative, receptive understanding toward students (and when needed, the more powerful triad of understanding, creative receptiveness), and discussing it, and pointing to examples of their use of it (Zimmer and Alexander).

By pushing (imposing requirements)

Constructivist learning means that students are expected to build their own understanding (Hird, Thompson and Rosie), so encouraging them to take organised charge of their own learning can be helpful (Muirhead). In particular, it can be useful to require them to reflect on their learning and on their own identity development (Rosie and Thompson, Gwynne and Chester).

It also makes a big difference if tutors have a firm expectation about what students will achieve (students will not bother with anything that they sense is not a core activity) (Phillips).

By avoiding (carefully not doing certain things)

It could be a problem for some online tutors that they do not have the authority that they do in face-to-face teaching. The learners could be more articulate and knowledgeable than the tutors. (Banks-D)

But there is little point in didactically pushing information at students; that does not exploit online dynamic interactivity (Scheuermann, Larsson and Toto).

In conventional education, the tutor must react immediately to any questions that students raise. In online learning the answer may be given after some minutes or hours and the teacher is able to select the proper timing. (Doufexopoulou-D). Indeed, tutors can do well to avoid always answering student questions, and to turn some questions back to them (Harris-D).

6.1.2 Tutor capabilities for facilitating collaboration

Tutors move to working online because they want to and are happy with a different role and with community building (Rosie-D).

Tutors can promote learning communities by (Muirhead-D quoting Allen 1997):

- empowering students,
- keeping current on new knowledge,
- offering wise feedback and encouragement,
- being a humble role model.

More specifically, tutors can facilitate collaboration by pulling (extending invitations), pushing (imposing requirements) and avoiding (carefully not doing certain things).

By pulling (extending invitations)

Tutors can cover the invitational ground by showing their own creative insight, their receptiveness and their understanding (Zimmer and Alexander).

Showing individual creative insight

It makes a big difference if the tutors love what they are doing. The students sense it and know it (White and Moussou). Modelling open, self-disclosing communication helps to create a comfortable, trusting, safe environment (Kulp). It invites students to join the tutor in exploring something that the tutor loves.

Showing welcoming receptiveness

A facilitator's democratic style can be crucial in letting students feel ownership of their learning space and in letting them share roles flexibly (Clarke). Creating a playful, warm environment "allows students to open up and experience the course both intellectually and emotionally"; this can be done through welcoming, reciprocity, and the persistent use of good questions (White and Moussou). In particular, encouraging students to personalise their learning, eg share their own ideas, can help them to learn and collaborate better (Ewing).

In addition, students who need a sense of "who the other person is" can be supported if all are encouraged "to publish a light-hearted home page" (Phillips). A personal profile can help students to seem more human to one another (Kulp).

Non-participants can be encouraged by emailing them and asking what is wrong (Anderson and Simpson).

Showing understanding

Positive responses from tutors can really encourage participation (Ewing).

Reciprocity, ie giving feedback online, is not only about content, but also about context and social bonds.

- Content: from a teaching perspective, this is expected.
- Context: in an environment where different threads may be going on, response sometimes loses context. Feedback becomes like weaving and synthesising along the way, rather than just at the end.
- Socialisation: if someone posts something and never gets a response, it is easy to feel that they were not 'heard,' especially for first timers and at the formation point for new groups. Reciprocity: the acknowledgement of contribution in the absence of physical cues is a MUST. (White-D)

A powerful technique for dealing with 'flaming' is for tutors to show not just creative, receptive understanding but to start at the point of response to what the 'flamer' is saying and to show understanding, creative receptiveness (Zimmer and Alexander). Specifically, this means showing:

- understanding of the request that lies behind the 'flaming', followed by
- a creative offer in response to that request, and finishing with
- receptive invitation of whatever the student might come up with by thinking in terms of this offer.

By pushing (imposing requirements)

Active participation can be encouraged by (Muirhead-D):

- asking questions that guide discussion and empower students to ask one another,
- requiring relevant interaction which has a focused topic with short term responsibilities,
- assisting peer learning through a class structure that gradually places more responsibility on students to direct their own online learning experience.

Some known prerequisites for effective co-operative learning are a mutual goal, positive interdependence, and individual accountability (Clarke).

Mutual goal

Giving early subject matter related exercises can help students to learn to connect with one another both electronically and personally (Kulp).

Positive interdependence

Requiring students to rely on one another for completion of group tasks can increase commitment to the community (Gwynne and Chester). Cultivating a strong ethic of group responsibility can be very effective, ie setting each task as a group task to be reported on, which requires each person to undertake part of it (Anderson and Simpson). Collaboration means "we either all make it work or we all fail" (Hird).

Individual accountability

Encouraging students to affirm their own accountability and that of one another can be useful (Muirhead). Both tutors and students can benefit if students are required to say at the beginning not only who they are but also why they are taking the course and what their support structures are like (Clarke).

By avoiding (carefully not doing certain things)

"Online instruction fails when it expects interaction, but simply delivers content ... that does not invite interaction." (White and Moussou)

It can be important for online facilitators to let go of actual project outcomes and help participants to manage themselves to achieve them (Murray, Clarke).

Showing students creative, receptive understanding means taking care not to impose dogmatic, judgemental demand on them (Zimmer and Alexander).

6.1.3 Tutor capabilities for creating structure

Tutors can provide structure by pulling (extending invitations), pushing (imposing requirements) and avoiding (carefully not doing certain things).

By pulling (extending invitations)

Didactic learning needs its own kind of space; experiential learning needs a play space; reflection needs a reflection space; group interaction needs a workshop space (White and Moussou).

Providing spaces for didactic (tutor centred) learning

"There is a role for didactic [*tutor centred*] learning alongside experiential [*student centred*] learning" (White and Moussou) in the sense that tutors have a right to share their own views and to invite students, even require them, to learn to look at things from that angle; what tutors cannot require is agreement (Zimmer and Alexander).

Providing spaces for experiential (student centred) learning

Use of aliases for pseudonymity can promote community-building play (Gwynne and Chester).

Providing spaces for personal reflection

Regularly requesting feedback from students as individuals, lets the tutor shape the course to their developing needs collectively (Hird).

Students can be told that they will receive a CD-ROM of the entire course after it is finished, so that they need not fear losing any part of it (White and Moussou).

Providing spaces for group interaction

One way to divide provided space is into space for team, task and individual (Adair 1983).

- ***Team space***: Collaboration can be set up among students or among teams or both (Scheuermann, Larsson and Toto). Putting students to work in small groups as tutors to other students can work well (Nurmela).
- ***Task space***: A course website 'under construction' as students progress can work very well (Hird).
- ***Individual space***: One way to enable sharing of resources which have been found, is for each student to have their own 'virtual desktop' onto which they put what they find and which all can see (Clarke).

By pushing (imposing requirements)

Activities

It helps to have activities that require group-work built into the course, possibly right into the printed materials (Anderson and Simpson, Phillips). An effective activity is to have them summarise something, share their summaries, and then reflect on the theory and practice of the sharing (Macdonald).

It can be very effective, to assign participants to learning teams and one or more team roles to each member: eg leader, scribe, subject specialist, encourager, checker, starter, implementer, wrapper (Kulp).

It even can be useful to require that student journals be kept in a public space (White and Moussou) but possibly only under aliases.

Assessment

It can help to have extrinsic rewards for learning like credits, certification, etc. (Juwah). In particular, participation by students can be assured if it is assessed as, say, 10% of the work (Macdonald, Phillips). This means that interaction must be both required and monitored (Anderson and Simpson).

A workable way to assess participation is to assess participation in conferences, keeping of a journal, and participation in a group project (Gwynne and Chester).

By avoiding (carefully not doing certain things)

A principle: for each technology based assignment, remove one traditional kind of assignment; avoid treating the technology based assignments as simply additional (Hird).

Interaction among learners was encouraged by the open and flexible approach of the course facilitator who also tended to take a 'hands-off' approach and let the students provide support, encouragement and solutions to problems (Clarke).

For development of online community, it actually can help if tutors forbid telephone communication (Clarke).

6.2 Tutor needs

6.2.1 Tutor needs for learning

It cannot be assumed that the competent face-to-face teacher will be a competent online teacher (Kennedy-D). Being a good communicator in the sense of the traditional classroom exponent may not necessarily mean that you can equally be a good communicator online (Finkelstein-D).

Tutors need to be trained online facilitators (Kulp). They also need to be subject matter experts (Kulp) and reflective learners (Hird, Rosie-D).

Learning to be online facilitators

Facilitation is a knowledge based skill that enables the group discussion to 'flow' (Wishart-D).

If tutors learn only the mechanics, they may try to use didactic methods online (Salter). Constructivist learning means letting their views be challenged (Hird).

"Even after staff development workshops, many academics are simply using the environment to post electronic lecture notes. The danger is that educationally ineffective or inadequate patterns of online teaching may become habits embedded in online teaching practice. This has led to the development of an online teaching module, based on constructivist principles, which attempts to model good pedagogical practice in online teaching." (Salter)

Tutors can learn online facilitation only from a course that walks its own pedagogical talk (Salter).

Possibly the single most important thing for tutors in learning to teach online is to participate first in being an online student (Hird).

Tutors need to have knowledge of good communication and social interaction skills (Banks-D). They need to emerge well versed in accepted theory of group processes and of collaborative group-work (Clarke). It can help if the trainer highlights all facilitative interventions and annotates these with the reason why they were made (White and Moussou).

Tutors also need to know how to become efficient in management of online, constructivist learning and this is not yet very well defined (Hird).

Support can be given by "providing a 'safe' environment where lecturers could express their concerns ... Creating an online learning community, a safe environment where participants could practise before teaching online". (Glass)

GRP-FACL listserv is a great source of didactic groundfloor group facilitation theory and skills. A list of facilitation tips is available at http://www.fullcirc.com/community/facilitips.htm. A paper about competencies is at http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitymanual.htm (scroll down to the facilitation section). (White-D)

Becoming subject matter experts

Tutors need to have (Banks-D):

- familiarity with software,
- comfort with being online,
- knowledge of what the online learning course requires from learners,
- knowledge of subject specialities in online formats.

Being reflective learners

Keeping a teaching journal can help tutors enormously in clarifying teaching issues for themselves (Hird).

Tutors need to be able to encourage reflection and action research pedagogy is one way to do this (Rosie-D).

6.2.2 Tutor needs for collaboration

Tutors can need a lot of support in order to learn to facilitate online collaboration (Juwah, White and Moussou). It can be a great help for the new online tutor to have an experienced mentor (Sharpe and Baume).

Communicating with online colleagues can provide much support and possibly solutions to teaching issues (Hird).

"The main point … is that it is very often inappropriate to take a rigid pedagogic approach to supporting the online tutor. A hands on approach where the central developer is intimately involved with the subject academic is a much more equal and dynamic process and one which makes more sense if seen as a collaboration." (Thompson and Rosie)

6.2.3 Tutor needs for structure

Tutors need a comprehending environment, a group size and workload that they can handle, and evaluation that makes sense to them.

A comprehending environment

It can be extremely important not to let people shape policy who have no experience of online learning. For example, online teaching cannot be viewed as a means to economy of scale; a class cannot work with more than thirty in it. (Hird)

The online tutor staring at a screen can look isolated to colleagues who do not understand what is going on (Hird).

Group size

The ideal group size is approximately twenty students; this is large enough to have a critical mass, but small enough to limit the workload (Phillips).

Workload

How does anyone know how hard and how long the tutor is working? (Hird)

"The more time I spend at a computer working online, the more I appear to be isolated from colleagues. The reality is that I have two sets of colleagues: those in my home institution and those in a variety of online settings. Balancing the day-to-day demands of my online projects at times conflicts with expectations for face-to-face collegiality which are grounded in pre-Internet assumptions. In other words, at the same time that I am juggling a whole new set of online professional relationships and demands, I am still expected to participate at a pre-Internet level in formal and informal, day-to-day departmental and institutional affairs." (Hird)

Facilitating asynchronous discussion actually is harder than facilitating synchronous (Neal). And course pacing can be difficult to set, in the fluid context of constructivist learning (Hird). So tutor fatigue can be an important factor, especially after the third week of an online course (White and Moussou).

Evaluation

How can online courses be meaningfully evaluated afterwards by students, for faculty statistics? (Hird)

It can be important to have a system in place for monitoring the feedback that tutors give to students (Sharpe and Baume).

7 Executive Summary

A successful online learning community has many of the same characteristics as a 'real' community. It offers individual support to its members, so that they can feel safe to communicate openly, which in turn allows them to develop the shared vision that they need in order to learn together.

7.1 Student needs and capabilities

Such a community emerges when students exhibit their capabilities, and their needs, for learning, for collaboration and for structure.

1. For learning, students may need individual support in directing their own learning processes so that they do not let an authority figure impose doctrine, judgement or demand. Ideally, they each understand their own learning process and can manage it for themselves.
2. For collaboration, students need open communication so that they can share their own creative questions and insights, show receptiveness, and show understanding to one another, rather than impose doctrine, judgement or demand on one another. Ideally, they understand these three needs and can manage their collaboration for themselves.
3. For structure, students need a shared vision of what their online community can be; with ground rules about netiquette and mutual support. Ideally, they can develop such a vision and such rules for themselves.

7.2 Tutor support

Tutors can do a lot to help students to succeed in each of the three areas above.

1. Tutors can support students in self-directed learning, by modelling it and by giving them individual support to do the same, and generally by creating a democratic working climate that fosters their ownership of their learning experience. Tutors also can help students to become not just self-directed but independent learners, by explaining constructivist learning and the respect that it pays to their individual intellectual autonomy.
2. Tutors can help students to learn together by modelling creative, receptive understanding and by using it to invite the same in return.
    - In particular, tutors can take creative care *not* to present their own views as objective reality. In this way, they can leave room for students' own views to differ. In terms of assessment, this involves asking for and guiding students' comprehension but not requiring students' agreement.
    - In addition, tutors can receptively invite students to have their own 'voice', in particular by posing reflective questions to stimulate their critical thinking. In terms of assessment, this involves asking for lucid argument.
    - Moreover, a tutor can catalyse discussion by doing conceptual 'weaving', ie not just showing understanding that summarises contributions (which can terminate discussion), but by then weaving contributions creatively together and receptively inviting students' ideas in response.

      Much the same technique can be used to take the negative energy out of 'flaming': showing understanding of the student's request that lies behind it, followed by whatever creative suggestions the tutor can think of in response to that request,

followed by receptive invitation of the student's insights in response to those suggestions.

Beyond this, tutors can recognise and honour student's knowledge and expertise by enlisting them as tutors for one another and helping them learn to manage their own collaboration with one another. In particular, tutors can help them learn to show understanding to one another, which they do not normally do without special training.

3. Tutors can help students to achieve shared vision:
   - of their individuality as learners, by providing descriptions and examples of different kinds of learning strategies which people have been known to use in order to construct understanding for themselves,
   - of their team, by providing descriptions and examples of how online communities can work, by showing how principles of netiquette and ground rules of mutual support can contribute to online communities, and by letting students give feedback (not criticism) on the helpfulness of one another's contributions to their own online community,
   - of their task, by providing ideas for collaborative projects, and by making it clear that both their individual and collaborative work will be assessed.

7.3 Tutor needs

Tutors themselves have needs which arise from the three jobs above.

1. For learning: they may need staff development to ensure that they are subject matter experts, have the skills to facilitate community development and learning through discussion, and can practise reflective learning.
2. For collaboration: they need communication with online colleagues, both for support and for ideas for solving problems that they might run into. It also can help considerably if they have an experienced mentor.
3. For structure: they need a comprehending environment, a group size and workload that they can handle, and evaluation that makes sense to them. In particular, this means protection from faculty evaluation procedures that are experimental and need to be tested.

7.4 Conclusion

Conferences like the OTiS e-Workshop can do a lot to help online tutors to meet their learning needs and to become effective facilitators for the ever growing number of online learning communities.

Appendix A References and Sources

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OTiS Discussions

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