BUILDING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AT A DISTANCE

Rovai, A. (2002). Building a Sense of Community at a Distance. Retrieved from the International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 3(1).

The purpose of this article is to draw on research literature to apply the concepts of learning communities and provide background and information on how they can be used in a virtual learning environment. To define community broadly, the author outlines the four dimensions of spirit, trust, interaction, and common expectations and goals. He then narrows focus to learning at a distance and the role of community there. The key question is, how do learners and instructors build a sense of community in a virtual classroom? Course design and pedagogy are identified as essential components, so the remainder of the article focuses on seven factors identified as positive correlates to creating a sense of community in online learning: transactional distance, social presence, social equality, small group activities, group facilitation, teaching style and learning stage, and community size. Attending to these factors is likely to help promote satisfaction and retention in online learning programs. It is possible that a strong sense of community can be built and sustained in a virtual classroom at levels comparable to the traditional classroom.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What is a major area of concern related to the major trends in development of online learning?
2. What does research evidence report about the role of feelings of community in learning in both traditional and virtual environments?
3. Why do Rheingold and Hill call for extensive research in a variety of contexts to fully understand sense of community?
4. What does a sense of spirit and trust allow learners to do in an educational setting?
5. How can interaction be categorized in relation to its effect on sense of community?
6. What does creation of “communities of practice” lead to in terms of learning?
7. Which of the seven factors identified as having a positive effect on sense of community do you feel has the largest impact and why?
8. What are the two functions of transactional distance and how do they differ?
9. How do teaching style and learning stage interact to foster sense of community?
10. What is the research-supported view on the effect of class size in traditional and virtual learning environments?
PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY IN GRADUATE LEVEL DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES


This article focuses on methods for creating a sense of community in online distance education to facilitate successful learning. Ruth E. Brown’s 3-stage model describes the process by which students become engaged in a distance education community through “making friends,” “community conferment,” and the development of “camaraderie.” (Brown, 2011). The article’s purpose is to present specific and practical pedagogical strategies to implement this 3-stage theory of community building in online distance learning courses. The Brown model’s 3 stages are achieved by implementing teaching strategies aligned with a fifteen-step process of community building. The authors identify the importance of approaching community development early to prevent student isolation and distress, which may lead to student dropout or failure. Rovai’s definition of traditional classroom community is also offered to highlight parallels between Brown’s 3-stage process by which community develops. Examples of specific pedagogical strategies that instructors may use based on Brown’s 3 stages range from “Creating a Supportive Environment” to “Illustrating Theoretical Frameworks with Student Stories.” Course activities involving interactive introductions, course chat, and responding to challenges and variations are also included. Applying these strategies allows instructors to take students through the process of positive social interaction to create vibrant online learning experiences.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What is the origin and rationale behind Brown’s 3-stage theory of community building in distance learning classes?
2. What role does community building play in the learning process?
3. Why is it critical to approach the issue of community early and with specific pedagogical strategies?
4. How does Brown’s 3-stage model parallel with Rovai’s description of a traditional classroom community?
5. Why is it valuable for students to gain an understanding of Constructivism?
6. What are some useful methods instructors can apply to create a supportive environment in distance learning?
7. How can course chat and interactive introductions build a sense of community?
8. How can sharing student stories help explain complex theoretical frameworks?
9. What are some effective community-building strategies to employ if a student’s responses do not fit with the themes of the course content?
10. What examples of community-building strategies can assist students in organizing information and identifying relationships between course content and their daily lives?
CONTRIBUTION OF LEARNER–INSTRUCTOR INTERACTION TO SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN GRADUATE ONLINE EDUCATION

http://jolt.merlot.org/vol8no4/shackelford_1212.htm

The purpose of this article is to identify which types of interaction contribute most to students’ sense of community in online graduate courses at a regional comprehensive university. A review of related literature examines the definition of community, interaction, and social constructivism. This analysis is limited to the learner and the instructor, and it focuses on seven types of interactions supported by empirical evidence. Instructors who provide information on goals, expectations, and ethics are able to build a stronger sense of community; so do instructor participation and facilitation of discussions. Providing support and encouragement, timely feedback, using multiple modes of communication, instructor modeling, and required participation have all been identified as effective learner-instructor interactions. This study uses Rovai’s Classroom Community Scale to measure sense of community along with Likert-scale questions to measure frequency and perceived importance of these seven constructs. Instructor modeling, support and encouragement, facilitating discussions, multiple communication modes, and required participation are the most predictive of sense of community. Instructor modeling is highlighted as showing the greatest results when balancing effort and benefits. Providing timely feedback did not emerge as predictive of sense of community. Discussions of implications for course design based on these results are also included to assist instructors in increasing student satisfaction with online learning.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What elements of the definition of community relate to student satisfaction with online learning?
2. What are critical goals for instructors attempting to foster positive learner-instructor interactions?
3. How does defining social constructivism help to identify the importance of creating a sense of community in online learning?
4. What are some examples of instructor behaviors that focus on providing information on goals, expectations, and ethics?
5. Why is it important for instructors to participate in and guide online discussions?
6. Why did providing timely feedback not have a significant impact on sense of community in this study?
7. What are examples of instructor modeling, and why is it recommended as the strongest out of all other learner-instructor interactions?
8. Why do required participation forums solicit more frequent and meaningful responses than optional forums?
9. What types of encouragement and support do novice online learning students desire?
10. What does this study confirm as a critical role for instructors to perform throughout online instruction?
INTERACTIVITY/COMMUNITY PROCESS MODEL FOR THE ONLINE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

http://jolt.merlot.org/vol6no1/lear_0310.htm

Going beyond Brown’s 3-stage process by which community develops requires an in-depth examination of interactivity’s role in online learning environments. The authors’ model examines interactivity at the start of a class, creating interactive opportunities for engagement, developing a sense of community, and then becoming an engaged learner. The study’s purpose was to determine if an online class’s interactivity was significant to building community, leading to a more engaged learner. Literature focusing on learning as a social endeavor serves as an introduction and builds into questions regarding student engagement. The researcher developed their own Interactivity/Community Process model to show the relationship of interactivity and sense of community as they move through the process of engaging in an online class. Mixed methods results indicate that students need to develop a sense of community through interaction with their courses, peers, and instructors. This interaction leads to a heightened sense of belonging and increases engagement, which elevates their sense of community and overall engagement. Understanding the role of interactivity and its relationship with sense of community may allow for improvements in classes offered in distance learning environments.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What are some reasons for the growth in online education, and how do they relate to interactivity and sense of community?
2. How can the social nature of learning be supported through interactive processes?
3. What mechanisms assist in formulating student perceptions of community and interactivity in online learning?
4. What role does student engagement play in learning success?
5. What are the three types of interaction in online learning?
6. How can instructors ensure interactivity and engagement?
7. Where does the cycle of engagement in online learning lead back to in the Interactivity/Community Process Model?