

Book Review – Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom

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Book Review - Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom

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Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom

Authors: Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publisher, San Francisco (1999)

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With advancements in Internet technologies, the methodologies associated with imparting education have changed significantly. The book under review, therefore, addresses issues specific to building effective online electronic learning communities. Organised in two parts, the book's first section examines the concept of learning communities in cyberspace, whereas the second part focuses on concrete aspects of building an electronic learning community.

Chapter two, "Defining and Redefining Community," examines human relations in cyberspace. It is here that the authors say electronic communication has brought on a shift from the "place-based community" to a "cyber society," where new online personas and identities have emerged. Because more time is spent processing information internally rather than interacting in face-to-face settings, this medium naturally suits more introverted people, who have what is called an "electronic personality." An important question thus emerges: Without face-to-face interaction, how does community building – one that takes into account all personality types – occur in online groups? Is it possible to build a cyber community without it? And how can the foundation of community, premised on ideals like ethics, goals, liabilities and social norms, be laid when we cannot see each other? To answer these questions, the authors begin by redefining the concept of "community" within the context of emerging Internet technologies. They then discuss the role of conflict on group cohesiveness, and ponder why some people fear electronic media, while others gravitate towards it. They conclude that for effective learning to occur online, the learning community must be treated as a vehicle, one where interdependency plays a central role. In short, the absence of mutual support and group participation stifles online learning. However, by taking simple humanistic approaches such as discovering common interests, discussing personal issues, and exhibiting flexibility on the

part of instructors, a more effective online learning experience will subsequently emerge – a dynamic that, in and of itself, will lead to a stronger and more vital electronic learning community.

The next chapter, “What We Know About Electronic Learning,” deals with virtual versus human contact. More specifically, coalescence, shared responsibility, rules, social roles and norms; psychological and spiritual issues; and vulnerability, privacy and ethics in delivering online courses are all discussed in great depth. While the authors say that some of these issues may not be that important in face-to-face class setting, they are the lifeblood of online courses. The authors therefore conclude that whatever technology we may adopt for electronic classroom, human elements play an inevitable role and therefore must be fully addressed.

Chapter four highlights concerns related to online activities. The amount of time required for adequate participation by both faculty and learners, and the optimal number of participants in an online classroom setting are both covered. The merits and limitations of synchronous and asynchronous environments, time off and online, information overload, time management techniques, and time constraints are also discussed in great detail. The authors also cover administrative issues related to time constraints, group size, payment and compensation of faculty members, and instructional motivation for online delivery.

The final chapter of part one is related to managing the technology and explores the role technology plays in online course delivery. In the building of an online learning community, the man/machine relationship forms a significant part. For instance, the section on how to use the media demonstrates that software/courseware must be user friendly, functional, yet visually appealing, for it to be effective.

Part two of the book focuses on the nuts and bolts of building an electronic learning community. The first chapter of part two, explains the transition to cyberspace learning by examining the role of instructors in terms of online community building and administration; and the role of learners in terms of knowledge generation, collaboration and process management. This chapter also explains the mechanics driving the paradigm shift from face-to-face learning to an online environment.

The remaining chapters explain the development of a successful online course. The chapter titled “Building Foundations,” for example, focuses on the creation of an effective online course syllabus and provides useful examples on how to create an effective online course delivery format.

Promoting collaborative learning is the focus of chapter eight. According to the authors, formulating shared goals for learning is an important element in the creation of collaborative learning environments. They give advice on tactics that help pave the way for collaborative learning such as helping students get to know

each other, and the creation of small online discussion groups where students can develop critical thinking skills and relate their course material with their real life experiences. To summarize, the objectives of inter-group collaboration, resource sharing and collaborative writing must be central in the creation of an effective online learning environment.

Jack Mezirow coined the term “transformative learning,” which denotes learning based on reflection and on the interpretation of experiences, ideas and assumptions achieved through prior learning. Chapter nine describes fundamental issues surrounding transformative learning in an online classroom environment.

Chapter ten examines evaluation tools that critically analyze student performance, and program and course evaluation in an online environment. For instance, the authors say student performance can be assessed through simple means such as establishing dialogue and getting to know students’ ideas and opinion, alongside techniques such as evaluating students’ assignments and self-evaluation.

The final chapter offers a general recap and peeps into the future. It is at this juncture that the authors strongly suggest that traditional classrooms will not be replaced by computer mediated distance learning and that electronic pedagogy does not favour eliminating faculty. Instead, development of new skills and approaches will be required to maximize the pedagogical effectiveness of online learning. Attributes such as honesty, responsiveness, relevance, respect, openness and empowerment are key elements in building highly functional virtual learning communities. The authors also see knowledge as the most critical resource for future social and economic development. They dismiss the idea that online education is a panacea for curing the ills of education today; instead they see it as an empowering tool for the new generation of learners – one that can help students navigate the growing complexities of our knowledge society.

Overall the book is a timely treatise. More specifically, it is a good resource for faculty, instructors, trainers or anyone involved in online or networked learning. It documents and analyses the pioneering efforts of the authors from when they were Ph.D. students deeply involved in researching computer mediated distance learning via online community building, to what is happening today.

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