Designing for Community in Online Learning Settings

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Librarians as Online Course Designers and Instructors

Lucy Santos Green, editor
In this issue of *Library Technology Reports* (vol. 55, no. 4), “Librarians as Online Course Designers and Instructors,” the authors explore how librarians can apply research-based practices for instructional design and online pedagogy when designing and delivering instruction for fully online learning settings. This report explains the role of librarians in online learning—as designers, instructors, or co-teachers. Throughout this report, the contributing authors address various considerations of online learning—ranging from fostering community and integrating social media to dealing with issues specific to online K–12 learning and to assessment and evaluation. Throughout, resources and recommended readings are provided.
Designing for Community in Online Learning Settings

Jennifer Banas and Russell Wartalski

This chapter is for librarians seeking to improve learning outcomes among adult learners by fostering community in online courses. To help the reader learn how to do this, we make use of recognized community-focused frameworks and concepts, including communities of practice, dimensions of community, modes of belonging, levels of community, the community of inquiry model, and the expanded community of inquiry model. Also relevant to the discussion are situated learning theory, self-regulation, and transactional distance. We do not seek to be a primer on these models and concepts; instead, we use them to understand the traits of learner communities and to organize the practices that support them in online settings.

When it comes to online instruction, we expect readers of this chapter will have expertise spanning from novice to expert. As a guiding framework, radical change theory and its three digital-age principles—connectivity, interactivity, and access—can help librarian instructors to critically consider best practices in fostering virtual learning communities in an evolving digital landscape. While initially a theory developed to describe the radical changes in children’s and young adult literature, radical change theory can also be applied to other settings. For example, Burns, Howard, and Kimmel contended that the theory helps to explain the contemporary changes in information behavior and resources and used it to examine collaborative learning among preservice school librarians in an online course. At the end of this chapter, we will demonstrate how the three digital-age principles can be used to guide instructional decisions for online learning environments.

Community, Learning Communities, and Communities of Practice

Over the years, researchers and practitioners have provided different definitions focused on community and learning. Community is “a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it.” Learning communities are made up of people, purpose, and a process that ultimately leads to reflection and transformation. Communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and experience in this area by interacting in an ongoing basis.” In examining these definitions, we see that a common feature is people purposefully coming together and being transformed by

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the process. Since the communities of practice framework provides more insight into the role of community in learning, we expand upon it here.

According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, the purpose of a community of practice is “to create, expand, and exchange knowledge, and to develop individual capabilities,” and it is held together by “passion, commitment, and identification with the group and its expertise.” They suggested that such communities are made up of three structural elements: domain, community, and practice. The domain is a shared learning need that inspires members to participate and gives purpose to their actions. Within this domain are a common ground and a sense of shared identity. Community refers to the interactions and relationships that develop based on respect and trust, with the outcome being a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. Finally, practice is a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, stories, documents, and language shared within a community. In an online learning environment, the domain is the topic on which learners focus and usually is set by the instructor, but community and practice, as will become apparent later, are the shared responsibility of the learner and the instructor.

Why Is Community Important?

In their research on adult learners, Knowles, Holton, and Swanson noted, “Adult learners like to share their knowledge.” It is the sharing of knowledge that leads to the first step of cultivating community. Lave and Wenger also expanded on the essence of community and learning in situated learning theory. Specifically, according to their theory, learning is a process requiring both social interaction and collaboration. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder pushed the idea further and noted, “Learning is a matter of belonging as well as an intellectual process.” As a result, content alone cannot be the basis for instruction. “By learning together in a learning community, students have the opportunity to extend and deepen their learning experience, test out new ideas by sharing them with a supportive group, and receive critical and constructive feedback.” One begins to realize that adult learners look for ways to purposefully enhance their learning and to expand their connection with other individuals. With these points in mind, librarian instructors can take steps to create community in online learning environments.

In online settings, planning for and nurturing a learning community is almost as important as planning the curriculum. Boling and colleagues found that when a sense of connection was lacking, learners described their online experiences as being less enjoyable, less helpful, and more frustrating. The potential lack of community in virtual settings is greater than in face-to-face settings. Moore noted that this distance is both psychological and physical and is a function of dialogue and structure. To bridge this distance, instructors must provide ample opportunities for learners to interact with each other and their peers in meaningful ways that promote feelings of connectedness. In the next section, we describe an ideal learning community and the course elements necessary to support its existence.

Fostering a Community of Learners

What Makes for a Good Community?

While the need for community may vary from one learner to the next, the characteristics of an ideal community are more commonly accepted. Rovai posited that a classroom community is made up of four dimensions: spirit, trust, interactions, and shared expectations. Spirit recognizes the concept of membership and the feelings of friendship, cohesion, and bonding that develop among learners as they enjoy each other’s company. According to Rovai, this spirit allows learners to challenge and nurture each other, thus creating a supportive environment for learning. Trust refers to the feeling that members can be relied upon for support. This trust is predicated upon members’ credibility and benevolence. Interactions, high-quality activities that focus on tasks, can contribute to a community. Relation-building exercises can serve to enhance connection among community members. Finally, there should be common expectations and goals. In an online learning environment, the learning goals serve as a common purpose, and the instructor establishes expectations for learners.

Offering another perspective, Wenger and Wenger-Trapner contended that community requires various modes of belonging: engagement, alignment, imagination, and identification. Engagement refers to opportunities to form relationships and purposefully interact with others. Alignment assumes that there are opportunities to organize and produce a product socially. Imagination allows members to experience and explore others’ perspectives and roles. Lastly, identification is the relational process between an
individual and his or her environment. Collectively, these modes help to form community and help learners feel part of it. As a result, librarians teaching in online learning environments should consider the ways in which their instruction nurtures these modes.

What Course Elements Foster a Community of Learners?

While an instructor might value community, forming it can be an elusive goal in online settings where learners do not have the opportunity to engage with each other or the instructor face-to-face. However, according to Wellman, when the concept of community is perceived as what people do together, rather than where they do it, then the geographical and spatial differences become less important. That means there is hope for forming community in an online setting!

According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, an instructor can and should take specific actions to foster community in online settings. They organized these actions into the community of inquiry model, a model that describes and explains the behaviors and processes required to nurture knowledge construction by cultivating three forms of presence: teaching, social, and cognitive. Teaching presence refers to the instructor’s role in the organization of content, the design of activities, facilitation of discourse, and direct instruction and how these decisions promote a productive community of inquiry. Social presence refers to activities that support a functional collaborative environment based on positive affect, interaction, and cohesion. Cognitive presence stems from a cyclical process of critical inquiry within a community of learners. This kind of inquiry stems from instructional activities, including a triggering event (e.g., a problem to solve), exploration (e.g., locating and evaluating information about the problem), integration (e.g., applying collected information to the problem), and resolution (e.g., presenting a solution to a problem and reflecting on the outcome).

Though perhaps its presence within the community of inquiry model is implied, Shea and Bidjerano advocated for the explicit naming of a fourth presence, learning, rooted in self-regulation theory. In this context, the learner must demonstrate both self-efficacy and effort, as well as time- and task-management skills. Shea and Bidjerano argued that without this presence, the original model, made up of interdependent components, neglects the role of learners in their own learning and within their community. With or without this fourth presence, the community of inquiry model promotes a learning environment in which learners feel comfortable and confident in communicating with each other and their instructor about important and relevant topics in ways that promote knowledge construction.

Designing Course and Learning Experiences That Foster and Sustain Community

Brown theorized that community formation occurs at three levels. At the first level, learners make online acquaintances with others like themselves. At the next level, community conferment occurs, and learners feel a sense of membership and kinship. At the third level, learners experience camaraderie, but only after long-term and intense association with others involving personal communication. If deeper levels of community are desired, at what points in a course does a librarian instructor foster them? In this section, we offer practical instructional design suggestions to foster and sustain community at various points throughout a course. To do this, we turn to radical change theory and Boettcher and Conrad’s step-by-step directives for building online courses.

As indicated in the introduction, radical change theory is rooted in three primary digital-age principles: interactivity, connectivity, and access. According to Dresang and Koh, interactivity refers to dynamic, nonlinear, and nonsequential learning and information behaviors that occur with an increasing sense of control by end users. Connectivity refers to the sense of community that emerges from changing perspectives and expanded associations. And access refers to the breaking down of information barriers, allowing for a wide diversity of formerly inaccessible opinion. These principles could be used by librarian instructors who are more familiar with face-to-face instruction to make instructional decisions specific to the online setting. For example, in what new ways does online instruction afford access to information and broader opinion, and how could an instructor capitalize on that as a learning opportunity? Or what new digital tools could promote connectivity between learners, with their instructor, and with expertise outside of the formal course setting? Or how does online instruction support new ways to interact with information and put learners in the driver’s seat to explore it? When combined with Boettcher and Conrad’s stages of an online course, these three digital-age principles also can help instructors to purposefully create online learning environments that support and sustain learner communities in what we now know to be a forever-evolving digital landscape.

Boettcher and Conrad divide online courses into four stages: course beginnings, early middle, late middle, and closing weeks or course ends. Borrowing concepts from the community of inquiry model, levels of community, and dimensions of community, for each stage Boettcher and Conrad offer specific tips to accomplish course goals. In table 1.1, we highlight some of those tips as they relate to building community and offer some of our own. We also demonstrate
how these activities align with radical change theory’s digital principles to help instructors to critically consider which activities to implement during course beginnings, middles, and ends as a means to support and sustain learning communities.

The activities listed in table 1.1 are not intended to be exhaustive, but merely an introduction to how librarian instructors can foster community at different stages of an online course. We suggest that the reader refer to Boettcher and Conrad for additional suggestions and more detailed descriptions. Also, we recognize not all librarians will be teaching multisession courses; therefore, instructors would have to modify activities accordingly, as well as expectations about the level of community to be reached. Whatever the course length, Boettcher and Conrad reminded instructors that the goal of community in an online course should be to build knowledge and
competency by way of a network of mutual respect and the sharing of ideas and perspectives.38

In Closing

According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, a community is the social fabric of learning. Communities help “to create, expand, and exchange knowledge, and to develop individual capabilities.”39 Attempting to foster community is particularly important due to the transactional distance both learners and instructors may feel in virtual learning environments.40 When online learners are part of communities built on spirit, trust, interactions, and common expectations, they are more likely to persist, to cooperate, and to report satisfaction.41 As a result, “nurturing a learning community as part of a course is almost as important as being present for your learners.”42

In this chapter, we shared recognized course elements associated with the promotion of learning communities and a critical lens through which librarian instructors can make instructional decisions as electronic forms of instruction continue to evolve. By exploring different theories and frameworks, particularly those known to maximize knowledge construction through social connection, we allow for equal opportunity for learner engagement.43 Through such practices, we not only attend to the needs of adult learners, including their need for professional identity, but we also allow them to experience others’ perspectives and to explore other roles.44 In doing so, the librarian instructor is not only a director of content, but also a facilitator of learning.

Notes


9. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, Cultivating Communities of Practice, 42.


11. Lave and Wenger, Situated Learning.

12. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, Cultivating Communities of Practice, 29.

13. Palloff and Pratt, Building Online Learning Communities, 8.


17. Palloff and Pratt, Building Online Learning Communities.

18. Moore, “Theory of Transactional Distance.”


22. Barry Wellman, Networks in the Global Village: Life in
integrated, can lead to powerful learning experiences and community building among learners. His storytelling approach delightfully describes the best, the worst, and in-between of social media use in online teaching.

This report concludes with Ross A. Perkins’s treatise on assessment and evaluation of online learning in chapter 6. Differentiating between assessment and evaluation, and detailing how the application of each impacts every step a librarian might take in the online learning process, Perkins guides the reader through a logical and systematic approach for considering the quality of one’s design and its impact on student learning from a program perspective. For those who value evidence-based practice and data that supports instructional, as well as funding, decisions, his primer on assessment and evaluation of online learning is a must-read.

Online learning, whether in higher education, K–12, community, or work-training settings, is a unique learning venue with its own pedagogical and technological needs. It is my hope that you find this report to be informative and well-structured, enabling you to provide your constituents with well-designed and well-supported online instruction, filled with “opportunities for personal growth and participation on a global scale; opportunities to become agile, life-long learners.”

Notes

2. Julia E. Seaman, I. Elaine Allen, and Jeff Seaman, Grade Increase: Tracking Distance Education in the United States (Oakland, CA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2018), 3.
7. Green, Jones, and Burke, “School Librarians Fully Online.”
10. Green, Jones, and Burke, “School Libraries Fully Online.”