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Facilitating online interaction using community building strategies

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Abstract:

Online learning communities provide a solution to the lack of opportunities for teacher and peer interaction and engagement when students study remotely. However, creating the intangible essences that make online learning communities effective, such as a sense of connectedness and a feeling of belonging, can be challenging. This paper describes a pilot online learning community to demonstrate the effectiveness of carefully facilitated activities during each stage of implementation. Student responses support claims of increased interaction while unit completion rates present a strong case for the merits of designing and facilitating online learning using a community building approach.

Introduction

The Diploma of Education is a community based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander course. Students study at a centre in their community with the support of a full time tutor who is based at the community. In 2005 Diploma students were located at seventeen sites from as far north as Poruma Island in the Torres Strait to as far south as Cunnamulla and Charleville in the south west of Queensland (Figure 1). The number of Diploma students at each site varied from one to four. In Semester 2, 2005 there were 48 students participating in the Diploma of Education course.

The 2005 Diploma of Education delivery was informed by research which the author conducted in 2004 that focused on meeting student needs (Bartlett, 2005). The findings of this research indicated a need for increased interaction amongst on campus teachers and students studying remotely. To this end, a pilot online learning community was facilitated to deliver a blended unit. This blended unit was known as the field trip and comprised of four weeks of online pre field trip activities, a week long field trip and four weeks of online post field trip activities.

This unit was chosen because in 2004 only 53% of the students who participated in the unit completed it. It was believed that the increased opportunities for interaction afforded by an online learning community approach to delivery might provide the impetus for students to complete the unit in 2005.

This paper describes the development and facilitation of this pilot online learning community. Student comments show that the implementation of community building strategies, facilitated using a stage model, resulted in increased interaction amongst students while unit completion rates demonstrate that 97% of students completed the unit in 2005.

Getting connected in an online learning community

Things are not simple when it comes to defining such an intangible concept as an online community and this is reflected in the myriad of definitions. White (2005) lists over twenty definitions of online community, each with their own slant, depending on the purpose of

the community. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework also notes the proliferation of different types of online community in the literature (Backroad Connections, 2003). These include: community of practice; learning network and community network; and learning community (p. 4). While each of these communities has unique attributes, they also have common features such as a shared purpose; common interests and a sense of connectedness. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework suggests that this connectedness can be described as an intangible feeling of belonging (Book & Oliver, 2002, p. 2 quoting McMillan and Chavis in Backroad Connections, 2003, p.4).

Figure 1: Sites where Diploma students were studying in 2005



A shared purpose and sense of connectedness had begun to develop during the two Diploma of Education face-to-face workshops that students had attended earlier in the year. However, at the end of each workshop the students returned to their communities and participated in the course with little opportunity for interaction with their peers and teachers. To this end, the goals of the Diploma of Education online learning community were to provide a learning environment that had a high degree of teacher and peer interaction.

Creating and facilitating an online learning community

Although clear goals and purposes underpin online learning communities, the definitions above demonstrate that there is also an aspect of online learning community that is intangible. According to

White (2004) all learning communities are ‘organic’, yet group interaction is not always spontaneous. She suggests that while facilitators can’t ‘make communities successful or force them to grow’ the group can be assisted to achieve its goals through careful facilitation (p. 1).

The importance of careful facilitation is noted by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework who state, ‘Effective facilitation (sometimes called moderation) is arguably the single biggest factor in the success of an online community’ (Backroad Connections, 2003, p. 3). While the role of the facilitator in the online environment is not unlike that of their face-to-face counterparts, unique communication challenges face online facilitators when developing community in the online environment. As such, it cannot be assumed that teachers and students have the necessary skills required to communicate and behave in an online learning community (Coghlan, 2001 in Backroad Connections, 2002, p. 2).

Understanding the stages in which online communities develop, the behaviours that indicate students’ progression through these stages, and the strategies that can be used to facilitate this progression can assist online facilitators to navigate the challenges inherent in fostering an online community (Backroad Connections, 2003; Salmon, 2005; Wegner, 1998). Moreover, Woods and Ebersole (n.d.) assert that effectively facilitated community building activities are those that help to develop ‘positive social dynamic and cognitive learning that is created through a variety of communication’ (p. 11). Consequently, Woods and Ebersole’s (n.d.) ‘Community building activities’ and Salmon’s (1997) ‘Model of teaching and learning online’ were used as frameworks to develop and facilitate the Diploma of Education online learning community.

The community building activities that were implemented at each stage are described below. Examples of the community building activities, along with student comments are also provided. Finally, these comments and examples are drawn upon support the author’s claim that this approach effectively assisted the online learning community to achieve its goals.

Stage 1: Access and motivation

According to Salmon (1997), the focus of this stage is gaining access to the learning environment. It is important that students have easy access to technical support should they encounter any problems accessing the learning environment. The role of the facilitator is to welcome and motivate students. Interaction during this stage occurs largely between the facilitator and student (p. 4).

It was important that Diploma of Education students were well prepared and supported to participate in the online community. Strategies used to do this included a face-to-face orientation to the online learning management system which included navigation, functions, netiquette and support mechanisms. In addition, expectations for participation had been previously communicated in the delivery plan and the printed learning guide that accompanied the online unit. Students were also sent an email inviting them to log on to the online community and were directed to the getting started section.

Expectations for participation were provided in the getting started section of the online environment and discussed during the first online chat. Modeling, the use of correct netiquette, positive feedback, monitoring of student participation and contacting students if they have not participated were all effective strategies which encouraged new members to access and contribute to the community.

A sense of online presence and ‘immediacy’ was created by: posting a welcome message; including a photograph of the facilitator; a statement outlining what students could expect regarding turnaround time and frequency of the online facilitator’s participation and through the use of prompt and relevant feedback from the facilitator. In addition, the facilitator used a friendly, informal tone and emoticons to compensate for the lack of non verbal cues.

Video streaming was used extensively in the Diploma of Education course to establish presence, provide expectations for participation, orient student, deliver content to be discussed in chats and create a sense of immediacy. When asked what she liked about video streaming, one student commented, ‘Well, when you get into Janison, you can actually see the teacher’s face. What they’re talking about...’ (S.M., 2005, pers. comm. September).

Figure 2: Creating presence using a welcome video stream

The screenshot shows a video player interface. On the left, there is a video player showing two women sitting at a table. Below the video player is a 'Contents' menu with links for 'Introduction', 'Welcome', 'Overview of Orientation', 'Outcome', and 'RATEP Sites'. The main content area is titled 'Introduction' and contains a list of bullet points: 'Hi, my name is Claire Bartlett and I am one of the Diploma teachers', 'I work in RATEP on Wednesday and Thursday', and 'I look forward to working with you this year!'. To the right of the text is a small portrait of Claire Bartlett. At the bottom, there is a contact form with fields for 'Email', 'Name', and 'Comment', and a 'Send' button. There is also a 'Support' section with a link to 'Online Help | Email' and a 'Close' button.

Stage 2: Online socialization

Interaction during this stage focuses learning how to interact socially in an online environment. Many students may require much support and encouragement to participate during this stage. Students also begin to develop an online identity during this stage (Salmon, 1997).

Students began to participate in two discussion forums during this stage: a social forum called the ‘Coffee Shop’ and an academic forum. The facilitator modeled and demonstrated the expectations required in each forum and encouraged students to participate by responding to postings within 48 hours and by weaving and summarizing discussion forum postings. Private spaces were also available, such as The Janison Learning Management System instant messenger function and a whisper function was available during online chats.

This resulted in high levels of interaction and support and created a sense of shared purpose and group cohesion and effectively supported students to build online relationships and establish their online identity. This is evident in the following communication:

(Facilitator) Did it ever help motivate you being part of a group and seeing other people putting their work there and...

(L) A lot, because in the beginning I was just lost and once I got to know everyone I kept in regular contact by email and um, the chats and you have your own little yarning room and see who's in there and then you'd see who you can get advice from and then send a little message (L.S., 2005, pers. comm. September)

Stage 3: Information exchange

The focus of the online interaction shifts from socialisation to information giving and receiving during this stage. According to Salmon (1997) the role of the facilitator during this stage is to support the students to navigate their way through the content as they learn to contribute (p. 4).

Woods and Ebersole (n.d.) suggest that regular updates and feedback increase perceptions of high degrees of teacher interaction and help to guide and plan study (p.7). They also note that personalized emails help to create a sense of 'warmth' and 'pro-social behaviour', as well as the impression of involvement (p. 6).

Email was used extensively to create and maintain a community, communicate progress, provide positive reinforcement and individual feedback. In addition, many students regularly emailed the facilitator to ask questions, clarify understandings of concepts or to seek feedback prior to posting their comments or assessment in the forum.

The facilitator used weekly announcements to provide regular updates, set future goals and clarify concepts or expectations.

Figure 3: Regular updates and feedback (announcements)

Information about the chats -

Author: [Claire Bartlett](#), To: All users in the Group: Diploma 2005

I hope you all enjoyed the chat yesterday. It was great to 'see' you in cyberspace and have a chat. Remember that although I have divided the pre field trip assessment into tasks to be completed each week (and it is preferable if you complete those tasks each week) it is not the end of the world if you are having problems getting info and cannot complete the task that week. The most important thing is that ALL PRE FIELD ASSESSMENT (1-4) needs to be completed by FRIDAY AUGUST 5 at the very latest!

Those of you who did not participate in the chat yesterday (because you are on prac or did not get the info in time) will need to complete an alternative task as the chat is an assessment item. The alternative task to the chat we had yesterday (Wed 6 July) is to read one of the chat transcripts that is in the discussion forum titled: pedagogies, principles and practices, watch the video streams and complete the readings. This will help you to answer the questions that were sent to you in the chat info sheet.

Please post your answers to these questions in the discussion forum: pedagogies, principles and practices. Let me know if you have any questions! Chat to you later! Cheers.

Stage 4: Knowledge construction

During this stage, the focus of the interaction is on the construction of knowledge. According to Salmon (1997) facilitators and students collaborate to understand the content and 'generate and make new meanings' and the role of the facilitator is to strategically stimulate and facilitate the groups' interaction (p. 4).

Group discussion encouraged interaction about the topic and supported students to develop cognitive skills. Students viewed video streams and participated in online chats prior to being expected to participate in group discussion. Moderation strategies included modeling constructive feedback and then encouraging students to provide constructive feedback to peers, weaving, summarizing and when necessary, archiving threads.

Diploma of Education students stated that they found the interaction and sharing to be beneficial. L.C. stated:

...I liked the discussion. At least we got some ideas and feedback from the other students and it sort of supported us too [...] it was just like being in the classroom but not seeing any faces [...] I knew where the other students were at with their work.' (L.C. 2004, pers. comm. November).

Additionally, when discussing different delivery modes, K.T. said:

...the only response you get is from one single person who's marking it, whereas this way you had a diverse group and points of view accordingly. (K.T. 2005, pers. comm. September).

Additionally, Woods and Ebersole (n.d.) note that, live chats facilitate live interaction and help to 'reduce perceived interaction difficulty and ...students like the quick response time that chat provides' (p. 11). Live chats were planned to support students to understand the course content, presented either using video streaming, web based resources, multi media instructional sequences or print based attachments. Chats were facilitated weekly and key concepts and jargon were scaffolded and discussed, with students justifying opinions and providing constructive feedback to each other. Students were sent an email which encouraged them to participate in the chats. This email also included the main focus of the chat and key questions which prepared them to participate.

The chat in Figure 5 was facilitated during the fourth week of the pre field trip activities and highlights the impact of these strategies on student interaction focused on the course content:

Stage 5: Development

According to Salmon the student is becoming more independent during this final stage (1997). The role of the facilitator is to support students to become more independent by providing guidance and access to additional facilities. The facilitator gradually withdraws as the student becomes more autonomous.

Upon completion of this unit of work most students moved on to the next unit of work so this autonomy was not apparent. However, the most surprising occurrence during this stage was how the community evolved to meet student needs long after the facilitation of the unit had finished.

Because the development and facilitation of this online learning community was a pilot it was not followed up with another online unit. In fact, there were no more online learning resources and the final units to be completed were electives or outstanding assessment tasks that students completed independently, using printed learning guides. However, despite the lack of academic content and facilitation around this, a cohort of about 15 students continued to

interact in the social forums and using the instant messenger until the course was completed. There was obviously a strong need to interact socially and this became the sole purpose of the community and brought students together online.

Figure 4: Online chat: alternative educational pedagogies

Chat script: how do alternative educational pedagogies assist the self determination of Indigenous Australians?

Facilitator> and most of you have written about what you think self determination is
 Facilitator > so how could the two way pedagogy...
 Facilitator > or the Steiner or any other alternative pedagogy...
 Facilitator > assist the self determination of Indigenous people?
 NA> gives indigenous people more control over curriculum
 AM> Self determination for indigenous culture means having the ability to make decisions for ourselves, it can be political, social & economic...
 DG> more than ever, to stand up for our culture, our way of life and our selves.....
 DS> putting the responsibility back into the indigenous child and parent hands about having a say in education
 SR> NA I fully agree with that comment
 SR> that's very true DS
 MO> The self-determination can assist in various ways through art, dancing, storytelling, language (English) and through the educational curriculum.
 AM> it is important that aboriginal culture is acknowledged & accepted
 DS> thanks SR
 AM> by making the people feel the culture is respected in education
 LS> gives the people a choice of what and how they want their chn taught
 DG> and this can be broaden in the education system
 MO> LC I totally disagreed with appendix f because that man is losing his identity/culture.
 AM> Self determination is non-indigenous society excepting indigenous culture & always maintaining cultural integrity
 DS> yes DG that's true too
 AL> the two way pedagogy assists self determination. They have listened to the community and what they value and want for their children.
 LC> True MO by only teaching English how is his culture going to be maintained and what about future generations when their left with no language
 AM> yes that I agree with you AL
 LC> No true self identity how can someone be fully self determined if they don't properly know themselves and their culture
 DG> yeah I totally agree MO without your language and culture you are nobody so don't loose it

One student, who was the only Diploma student at her site told the facilitator that the first thing she did when she arrived at the study centre each day was to log on to the learning management system to see who was online. This is what she said about the impact this had on her:

(Facilitator) What about the social aspect, like what did you think about being part of a group?

(T.A.) Good, and logging onto Janison you could see all those little yellow people and put your little arrow there and see who was there. It was good...I lived on Janison.

(Facilitator) Was it your lifeline to the rest of the students?

(T.A.) Yes! (T.A. 2005, pers. comm. September)

This indicates that the learning community was indeed 'organic' (White, 2004) and successful in more ways than planned.

The impact of a learning community approach: participation rates

Earlier on in this paper I defined an online learning community as one that was based on connectedness and an intangible feeling of belonging. While it is difficult to measure the existence and effect of these intangible concepts in an online learning community, some of the comments from the Diploma of Education students that have been presented throughout this paper allude to this connectedness and the impact it had on their participation.

The following student comment clearly articulates the connectedness and group cohesion that was developed in the Diploma online learning community and the importance of effective facilitation, based on respectful relationships:

We marched into the unknown as a bunch of individuals and came back a group bound together by the experience. We learnt to trust our instinct, each other and our strengths and weaknesses as a group. In order for us to have achieved as a group we had to have a good facilitator. You were that string of strength and guidance....Thanks for a lasting and memorable experience. (T.K. 2005, pers. comm. 5 September)

Students' responses and examples of community building strategies that were presented at each stage also demonstrate the positive impact that carefully designed and facilitated community building activities have on facilitating effective interaction in an online learning community. Moreover, the unit completion rates for 2005 also support my claim that the online learning community impacted positively on student participation.

In 2004 the pre and post field trip tasks were completed independently in a self paced mode. There was a due date for the completion of the pre field trip tasks but not for the post field trip tasks. 30 students completed the pre field trip assessment tasks and field trip component (or alternative task). 16 of these students (53%) completed the post field trip activities when they returned to their community.

In 2005 the pre and post field trip tasks were completed online. There was a due date for the completion of the pre field trip and post field trip tasks. 31 students completed the pre field trip assessment tasks and field trip component (or alternative task). 30 of these students (97%) completed the post field trip activities when they returned to their community. This is an increase of 44% and given the student comments and the absence of any other mediating factors, can be attributed solely to the effective facilitation of the online learning community.

Conclusion

This paper has described the context in which the Diploma of Education online learning community was created and how it evolved. The facilitation of the online learning community was described using a theoretical framework, examples of community building activities and student comments. The critical success factors for the creation and maintenance of an effective online learning community in this particular context included: including strategies that create a sense of online presence; providing a range of community building activities;

planning for effective facilitation at every stage and approachable and responsive facilitation. In conclusion, student comments and pre and post unit completion data were used to support my claim that the effective development and facilitation of the online learning community positively impacted on levels of student interaction and in turn, participation.

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