

# Building Online Learning Communities

## Techniques that Work!

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# The Importance of the Learning Community

- Research continues to show that the construction of a learning community, with the instructor participating as an equal member, is the key to successful online course outcomes and is the vehicle through which online education is best delivered.
- Intentional work on the development of presence online as well as other means by which community can emerge are important and significantly impact both student learning and satisfaction with online courses.

# Where the Concept of Community Should Be Incorporated

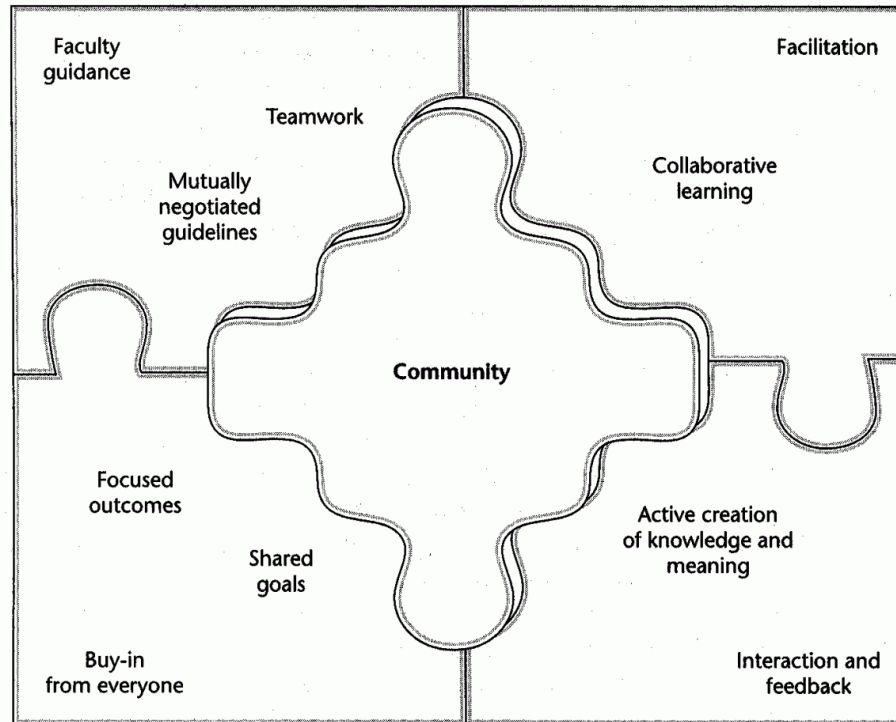


# Why is this Important for Online Social Work Classes?

- Social Work is community-oriented
- Social Work is about empowerment
- Social Work is about inclusion
- Social Work is about social justice

Online Learning Communities incorporate all of this into the academic work they do! Building community in our online classes models our social work values!

# Fitting the Pieces Together to Form Community



# Presence as a Critical Component

- There are 3 forms of presence that emerge in an online class (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001):
- Social Presence – who we are when we interact online and the ability to portray ourselves as real people in the online environment
- Teaching Presence – design of the course and facilitation of learning
- Cognitive Presence – co-creation of meaning through communication

# The Role of Presence

- Presence is a key correlate in developing community online
- When there is a high degree of interaction between the participants, the degree of social presence is also high and vice versa

(Stein & Wanstreet, 2003)

# Social Presence Online Correlates With:

- Increased participation
- Increased learner satisfaction
- Greater depth of learning
- Increased perception of learning
- The sense of belonging to a learning community
- Decreased isolation



# Social Presence

- Is not just about the use of discussion/ interaction although the use of discussion helps to create presence
- It is about finding ways to create human to human contact



# The “Presence” of Presence

Polhemus, et al (2001) noted that some of the indicators that social presence has emerged in an online class include:

- The use of personal forms of address
- Acknowledgement of others
- Expression of feeling and emotion
- The use of humor and social sharing
- The use of textual or graphic symbols such as emoticons, different font colors, different fonts, capitalization, and the use of characters or graphics for expression

# For Presence to Exist, Instructors and Students Should Have:

- The ability to carry on an internal dialogue
- The creation of a semblance of privacy
- The ability to deal with emotion via text
- The ability to formulate and keep a mental picture of communication partners
- The ability to personalize communications
- A sense of their own presence!

# Techniques for Developing and Sustaining Community Online

- Begin the course by focusing on the development of social presence

This can be achieved through the posting of bios and introductions and enhanced through the use of ice breaker activities that are fun and designed to help students get to know one another. Use the first week of the course for these activities and delay real engagement with content. The content can be used as a basis for ice-breakers, however.

# Develop Presence By:

- Creating a warm, inviting course environment
- The use of ice-breaker activities
- Posting introductions and bios
- Promote social discourse, either asynchronously or synchronously
- Incorporate collaborative activity
- Welcome each learner to the course
- Provide prompt, unambiguous feedback as the course progresses

# More Techniques for Creating and Sustaining Community

- Establish guidelines for engagement

This can be achieved by posting a set of guidelines or expectations developed by the instructor and asking for a response to them by students OR students can be given a set of parameters within which they can negotiate and develop their own “rules for engagement,” thus creating a group charter by which that engagement is guided.

# More Techniques

- Establish minimal participation guidelines

The minimum expectation for participation should be included in the guidelines, with an understanding that more is better! The instructor should model good communication through regular participation in discussions and prompt feedback on assignments.

# And One More...

- Develop courses that are exciting and challenging and that incorporate collaborative activity and opportunity for reflection

Collaboration helps to develop and sustain the online learning community. Working together in smaller groups helps to develop



# Evidence of the Presence of Community

- Active interaction involving both course content and personal communication
- Collaborative learning evidenced primarily by student-to-student communication rather than student-to-instructor
- Socially constructed meaning evidenced by discussion with the goal of mutual understanding
- Free sharing of resources among students
- Expressions of support and encouragement as well as willingness to critically evaluate one another's work

# A Model of Community Building

