

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO SUCCEEDING WITHIN AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

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(I would love to hear any feedback that you would have to improving this article.

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The other day my toddler and preschooler were sitting around the table while the preschooler practiced sorting and counting different coins from the family money jar. The toddler wanted to participate too, and I asked her, "Are you learning about money too?" Thinking about it, and then looking doubtful, she said, "I don't know how to learn." She then brightened and continued hopefully, "I know how to *play*!"

Many graduate students are like my toddler when it comes to online learning, particularly with learning in an online community. While play, exploration, and gaming through online technologies can be an effective method for learning in and of itself, many graduate students struggle to use online technologies for other forms of structured learning—such as in a formal online course. The problem is not a lack of familiarity with the tools or methods—students usually have plenty of experience with online social technologies such as MySpace, Facebook, Yahoo/Google groups, etc. Instead, they have a lack of understanding about how to use these tools and methods for class-based learning. As they enter a community with the purpose to learn, many report feeling like the title of a recent journal article about online students: "Engagement, excitement, anxiety, and fear" (Conrad, 2002). Simply, these students know how to play in online communities, but they often do not know how to learn in online communities.

While not extensive, this article is geared towards helping those graduate students who are either anxious or fearful of how to participate in an online learning community, or simply do not know how to make such an online community work so that it is effective. While there have been many articles and books written to help instructional designers and teachers build effective online communities (e.g. Bonk, Wisher, & Nigrelli, 2004; Dawes & Sams, 2004; Hildreth & Kimble, 2004; Lewis & Allan, 2005; Lowry, Thornam, & White, 2000; McConnell, 2006), there is a need for a treatise to the new online learners themselves, who may need guidance in learning how to learn online (Palloff, 2001).

What Is a Learning Community?

Researchers have been arguing about what exactly defines a person's community for decades (Hillery, 1955). For some, a community is who you know and who is close to you, physically, either in a face-to-face class or as your neighbor living next door (Lichenstein, 2005; West, 2007). Some have taken this extension onto the Internet, arguing that an online community is made up of those people "close" to you in cyberspace, or those people you "bump into" you often enough (Rheingold, 1993). Others have argued that community is what is felt, or sensed, psychologically (Glynn, 1981; Hill, 1996; Sarason, 1974). For these scholars, the community exists if people feel that they belong to one, and that there are people they associate with that they trust, respect, or relate to. Still other researchers define communities as members who share similar goals, visions, or purposes (Tu, 2004), or who have been assigned to work on similar tasks (West, 2007). This latter definition may best describe the kind of community a graduate online student will belong to at first. Ideally, as the learning community grows, the students will have more in common than a similar task, project, or course number, and the relationships and learning will be richer.

How Do Online Learning Communities Compare to Regular Learning Communities?

Online Learning Communities (OLCs) are similar to face-to-face learning communities in many ways, but different in others. Sometimes these differences can be shocking to a first-time online learner, and students should be cautious about comparing an online learning experience with a face-to-face one since the instructional models and experiences are very different. Students need to realize that they are learning a new way to learn, and that it might take "all semester to become a full participant" in an online community (Lowry, Thornam, & White, 2000; p. 298). Some of the biggest differences are with the manner of communicating with others in an OLC. Communication is almost always in the form of text, rather than spoken dialogue, although newer technologies are making voice-to-voice communication more accessible. This much text can seem overwhelming, when pages and pages of discussion board postings show up in your online course, waiting to be read. There are also no nonverbal cues (Lowry et al., 2000) or auditory inflections (Weiss, 2000) to give you feedback about the tone of someone's remark. For example, the statement, "no way" could represent anger, playfulness, disbelief, or many other emotions. When written in just plain text, much of the meaning can be lost, which can make communication difficult and flaming (posting of an angry response, often because of a misunderstanding) more likely. Renée Weiss (2000) has written, "Sometimes it is important to know not only *what* is being said but also *how* it is being said" (p. 47).

Online learning communities also have a different sense of timing than face-to-face communities. For example, in face-to-face communication, when you ask a question, you expect an immediate response. In OLCs, the expected timing for responses may vary from instantaneous (and perhaps being sent even before you have finished typing the question!) in synchronous chatting to within hours or even days for email or discussion boards. This allows community

members much greater flexibility and convenience—the hallmarks of online learning—in when and how they respond. This also allows for more thoughtful and reflective responses than is usually possible in regular learning environments. This can also effectively level the playing field for all of the students, as it allows for timid or introverted community members, as well as learners who speak English as a second language, enough time to formulate their answers. After they have posted their comments, the text is the same as that for any other student, and the black ink on white background shows no bias for whoever spoke loudest. Thus, every student's comment can be given equal weight.

Another difference that is sometimes disconcerting to new online learners is that the access to the teacher is quite different. Instead of walking into a classroom where the teacher is always present, you will often be interacting with other students and content in your online community without the teacher being “there” at all. While many students find that the teacher is much more accessible online and often willing to respond quickly to questions by email, the teacher takes on a facilitative role, allowing the students greater autonomy in working together (Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

Students also often notice differences in themselves as they engage with an online learning community. Extroverts often become more introverted online, because there is less “noise” and visible action to energize them. Meanwhile introverts often become much more extroverted online, sometimes contributing the most to the community (Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

Besides these differences, there are also many similarities between OLCs and regular learning communities. Sometimes students do not expect these similarities, and are surprised to learn, for example, that learning still takes a lot of time and effort in an OLC, just as it would in a regular learning community. Learning in an OLC is also not necessarily easier or harder than in a

face-to-face community—those differences depend on the content material, the students within the community, and the nature of the community itself. Finally, just like in face-to-face communities, members of OLCs can still feel that they belong, feel close to others, and have meaningful relationships with other members of the community. Many researchers have learned that what really impacts the perception of how "close" community members feel to each other is transactional distance, which is a combination of how the community is structured, the autonomy of the students, and the nature of the dialogue in class (Peters, 2001). Sometimes face-to-face classes engender large feelings of being "distant" from other students, whereas online communities can do the reverse. Sometimes the opposite is true—it depends on the nature of the community not necessarily whether it exists physically or virtually.

Why Are Online Learning Communities Important?

While social and cultural factors always influence how we learn (Bandura, 1986; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, Wertsch, 1985), not all learning environments would meet most definitions of a learning community. Online learning, for example, can include everything from independent study where interaction with teachers or other students is limited, to vibrant, interactive communities where students know and support each other and co-construct knowledge together. With different options available for how to learn online, why should students want to participate in creating an online learning community?

The first reason is because learning communities help students feel connected. Online learning has traditionally had a high drop-out rate—often 10 to 20% higher than in traditional courses and sometimes as high as 50% (Carr, 2000). Many of these students leave after complaining that they felt isolated and alone as they struggled to learn the material (Canada, 2000). "Because of the absence of audio and visual cues and the removal of the classroom

environment, students often feel that they are alone. They feel that they are not communicating with other human beings" (Weiss, 2000, p. 48). Active online communities help students overcome this isolation, introduce students to others in the class that they can turn to for assistance, and help students feel that someone is really "listening" to their comments. Online communities also help students feel connected to their academic program and school, even though they may not have the opportunity to step inside one of the brick-and-mortar buildings on campus.

In addition to helping students feel more connected, research has proven that learning within a supportive community is more effective. Chris Watkins (2005) summarized much of what we have learned about the benefits of learning communities. In his summary, he argues that learning communities lead to higher student engagement, greater respect for the diversity of all students, higher intrinsic motivation, and higher learning outcomes in the areas that are most important. May Lowry, Christine Thornam, and Cason White (2000) similarly reported, "Research in contemporary learning argues convincingly that there are more substantial gains in learning when learners are actively involved" (p. 308). Finally, Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt (2001) have found that OLCs "increases the likelihood that they [students] will stay involved and motivated" (p. 138), while Shin (2003) explained that perceptions of being "present" with the teacher, peer students, and the institution improved students' intentions to finish the course and increased their satisfaction.

Building an Online Learning Community as a Student

Knowing that learning communities are important is not enough, because building online learning communities is not easy (Schwen & Hara, 2004). The rest of this article will address the question of how to build an online community from the inside out—through the actions of the

students within the community. Students can best build an online learning community by focusing on the key interactive elements of an OLC. Every successful OLC reflects four types of interactions: learner-learner interaction, learner-content interaction, learner-teacher interaction, and learner-tool interaction. Success in strengthening interaction in each of these areas can lead to a successful OLC.

Learner-learner Interaction & Learner-teacher Interaction.

The strength of a learning community rests on the ties that bind its members, so helping students learn to interact effectively is critical. The first step to effective learner-learner interaction is a basic understanding of netiquette, which is etiquette specific to online communication. Just as face-to-face communication follows unwritten but acknowledged standards, such as taking turns when speaking, there are important unwritten rules governing courteous communication in cyberspace. A few critical ones for OLCs are to always assume good intent of the person posting a comment or sending a message (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 150). Without nonverbal and auditory cues, text messages can often be misunderstood. A followup to this is the counsel of waiting at least 24 hours before responding to an attack because "the intensity of the message always seems to wane with time" (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 150). Ignoring this advice leads to flaming, or posting of critical and angry personal attacks, and these can be destructive to a community.

Other important netiquette guidelines refer to timing for communication within a community. Much communication online is asynchronous and community members can take as long as they like to respond. However, most of our daily lives happen synchronously, and so asynchronous timing can be jarring. The person expecting a response should be understanding about any delays and remember that if a person is sick, on vacation, or busy at work, they may

not check their messages very frequently. Especially on the weekend, community members should not expect prompt answers to their messages. On the other side, when a response is expected, students should attempt to respond as quickly as possible, even if to say, "Good question. I'll think about it and post something tomorrow." Short messages such as this can be the equivalent in face-to-face communication of nodding your head to show you heard the comment. Other important netiquette guidelines are provided in Figure 3.

Develop the relationship. All good relationships require time and effort to develop to a level beyond basic netiquette, and this is true as well in relationships between members of OLCs. Students building an OLC should take the time to develop relationships with other members of the community—just as face-to-face learning communities often begin by taking a day for members to share and get to know each other (Lowry et al., 2000, p. 312). In fact, researchers agree that meeting face-to-face at the beginning of forming an OLC can improve the sense of connection members feel towards each other. "It is widely accepted that online groups are often more effective if they are initially formed by some type of face-to-face meetings." (Clarke, 2004, p. 14). However, if this is not possible, online communities often have places where students can post their pictures or short biographies of themselves. Simply having a picture attached to their bulletin board messages or instant messages can strengthen the recognition that there is a human being, with emotions, thoughts, and histories, behind the text.



A Guide to Netiquette

1. All take a turn, and everyone gives a turn
2. Don't write everything in uppercase
3. Break text into short paragraphs, leaving a line in between
4. Write concisely. Online learning requires a lot of reading and people will be more likely to read your messages if you get to the point and make it concisely and clearly. Planning ahead what to write helps.
5. Revise before submitting. The benefit in online learning is that you can revise what you say before making it "live."
6. Avoid acronyms, including internet-specific acronyms (BTW, LOL, and so on). They seem hip and trendy, but not everyone will know what you are saying.
7. Avoid time-saving contractions (e.g., "ur," "cya,") except *maybe* in fast-moving chat-rooms. Otherwise they won't save you that much time and will reflect poorly on your attention to detail, writing ability, and effort, which are critical skills for online learning. Others may wonder how good of a team member you'll be.
8. Use emoticons or brackets to show emotion (e.g. [I'm kidding here]). Be careful to use common emoticons that people will know, otherwise miscommunication still occurs.
9. Always say who you are quoting and give a URL when possible.
10. Avoid taking long quotes from other sources. Use only what you need.
11. Avoid the "me, too!" habit in posting. Post something substantial.
12. After posting a question or comment, check back in a few days to see if someone is responding to you.
2. Always assume good intent from others in their messages
3. Wait 24 hours before replying to an attack
4. Expect occasional conflict
5. However, don't mistake confusion for conflict
6. Be considerate in your language—the lack of visual/auditory feedback makes it so you do not see the effects of what you say on others.
7. Reply to others quickly, within 24 hours if possible, even if to say, "Thanks for the note, I'll get back to it in a couple of days."
8. Post frequently. Remember that your electronic conversation is the only conversation you are having with your group. Going too long without talking will leave others wondering if you are even listening.
9. Test out the technology a few minutes ahead of schedule so precious group discussion time is not wasting with technical glitches.


Adapted from Clarke, 2004; Dirks & Smith, 2004; Lowry et al., 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2001, 2003; Weiss, 2000

Figure 3. A guide to basic netiquette in online learner-to-learner interactions.


Textual messages can also be made to sound more "human" by adding tone to the messages through the use of humor and honesty, emoticons, personal and expressive language, making a mental picture of the person you are talking to online, and even by bracketing comments to explain the intended tone of your message ["I'm just joking here", for example] (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Weiss, 2000). In addition to making online "speech" more natural and human, critical "listening" is just as important in online as in face-to-face communities. "To be sure that you get the most from your participation in on-line discussions, you need to use the same skills you would use to listen critically to the teacher and classmates in a traditional setting." (Kramer, 2002, p. 191). Candice Kramer suggests that students can be better critical listeners online if they are 1) mentally awake and prepared to participate; 2) willing to ask questions, and 3) aware of "filters," such as biases, judgments, and attitudes that affect how you interpret messages.

Perhaps most important is to simply remember that there are three functions of online communities, and efficient accomplishment of a task is only one of them. Online communities also exist to support the members and to take care of individual needs (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). These purposes and goals for a community can only be met if members encourage each other to not just participate in the community, but to collaborate together in the learning. "Simply interacting with one another is not enough. . . . Participation in an online course is not the same as collaboration. Collaboration goes beyond direct engagement in specific activities and is consistent throughout the course. It is a process that helps students achieve deeper levels of knowledge generations through the creation of shared goals, shared exploration, and a shared process of meaning-making." Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p. 23).

Many online communities have a designated space for members to socialize about topics not related to the course content. Often, these spaces are most beneficial if they are for students only, and not for instructors. This allows students to have the same kinds of informal discussions that they might normally have in the hallways before a face-to-face class begins. An example of such informal social spaces is Tappedin, the online professional community for teachers. Upon entering Tappedin, there are many different kinds of spaces available for interaction. Some of these spaces are designated by their name and visual cues to be formal learning spaces (such as the Arcade Conference Room), while others are clearly informal spaces (such as the hot tub, see Figure 4). This differentiation of spaces cues community members into what kinds of dialogue are encouraged in each space. In online communities without much simpler interfaces than Tappedin, an informal discussion can be as simple as a chat room or discussion thread designated as the "water cooler." Students should encourage their instructors to include such informal spaces in the community setup. Students can greatly improve the sense of connection they feel to other students in the community by spending some time in this informal space, especially at the beginning of the semester, or of their initiation into the community.


Me
Tapped In
Help
Search
Logout

You are in Tapped In Reception
Tapped In Reception
Go!



[Welcome](#)
[In This Building](#)
[On This Floor](#)
[Notes](#)
[Files](#)
[Links](#)
[Discussion](#)
[Whiteboard](#)
[Passageways](#)

[Tapped In Reception](#) : On This Floor

Rooms on this Floor

Type	Name	Nickname	Owner	Number of People
Public	After School Online	ASO	Admin	0
Public	Arcade Conference Room	ArcadeConf	Admin	0
Public	Comfy Conference Room	ComfyConf	Admin	0
Public	Hot Tub Conference Room	HotTubConf	Admin	0
Public	On Tap Cafe	TapCafe	Admin	0
Public	Tree House Conference Room	TreeConf	Admin	0
Reception	Tapped In Reception	TI Reception	Admin	2

Here
Online

You are in ArcadeConf, TappedIn campus

Actions...

RickwGst4

RickwGst4 entered the room.

1 users

Say

Figure 4. A screen showing the different chatrooms available for interaction in Tappedin, including some with a clearly informal theme.

Another key aspect to developing relationships with other members of the community is to purposefully engage in a norming period, one of the key stages of group formation (Tuckman, 1965). Norming is the process of establishing the unwritten or written rules for participation in the community. Members can discuss their opinions about how often communication should take place, in what format, and how disagreements should be handled. Because of the faceless nature of online learning, developing these norms naturally can be more difficult than in face-to-face settings, and so an online community may need to be explicit about initiating the norming discussion. Many misunderstandings can be prevented by agreeing early on the community's norms.

Effective communities also have a developed sense of trust among members (West, 2007). Community members must learn to trust each other and rely on each other for assistance. When assistance is requested and then provided, members feel closer to each other and more interdependent, which strengthens the community (Dirkx & Smith, 2004) and helps members construct their identities as members of the community (Wenger, 1998). Students can develop this interdependence by learning to rely on each other, rather than the instructor. When misunderstandings in the content area do occur that require the expert opinion of the instructor, the group can approach the instructor together. When learning groups develop this interdependence, instructors are relieved of the need to stamp out the little fires that can be overwhelming in large online communities and focus their energies and providing quality instructional feedback in the most critical areas.

Learner-tool (Technology) Interaction

Tools, including modern technologies, are always important mediators within problem-solving communities (Engeström, 1999). This is especially true in online learning communities

where technology plays a very visible role in facilitating all of the community's actions. Because technology is so critical to the online community, students' interactions with the technology are very important. Many students choose to take their academic courses online because it is cheaper and more convenient than moving on-site. However, students should be careful not to cut too many corners in equipping themselves with the appropriate technology to allow them to be full participants within a community. It is not fair to a particular student or that student's peers if the student is using dial-up Internet, an outdated computer, and antiquated software that is no longer compatible with current versions. In these situations, it will be very difficult for the student to share and collaborate with others, and the student may withdraw from the community because of technological barriers. Student members of an OLC should expect to have to shoulder some cost in having the right tools to be able to engage in the community (Dirkx & Smith, 2004).

Students also should shoulder the responsibility for knowing how to use the technology. Technology often becomes a scapegoat for students when things go wrong (Dirkx & Smith, 2004), even though the real reason may be that the students have not prepared themselves through training in how to use the tools. Many texts for online learners expect students to have minimal skills with technologies such as word processing, file management, instant messaging, email, discussion boards, etc., and many academic programs will test students to make sure they have the basic skills (Lowry, 2000, Canada, 2000). However, in the end, it is up to the students to ensure they know how to use the online tools available, and if not, to seek training or resources.

No matter how skilled students are with technology, they should expect that technology will—not may—fail some of the time. Anxiety in these situations can be avoided by preparing for these situations through frequent saving of documents, and even discussion board posts, in

separate locations. Before scheduled synchronous chats with other community members, students should also test out their technology or login a few minutes ahead of schedule, so that precious group discussion time is not wasted with technical glitches.

Learner-content Interaction

The final type of interaction in an OLC is between learners and the content. Students' interaction with the content in an OLC is much the same as in face-to-face communities, except that students must show much greater self-regulation. Mark Canada (2000) has summed up the importance of this aspect of an OLC nicely: "The online student, however, cannot live by RAM alone. Even more importantly [than tech skills] is the ability to manage time and work effectively" (p. 36). Self-regulation is highly correlated with success in online learning communities. Because of the nature of OLCs, teachers may be less present, deadlines may be softer, flexibility may be greater, and homework may be geared towards more autonomy and self-directed problem solving. In this environment, without carefully monitoring one's own learning, students can lose track of time, fall behind, and become overwhelmed. There is also less external motivation to develop relationships with other members of the community, since you cannot see their faces waiting expectantly for your response to a query. As Mark Canada (2000) describes it, traditional learning is much like an athlete who is constantly under the coach's observation and so is highly motivated to keep performing. Online learning, in contrast, is much like a pianist that is practicing in private for a recital that will come at a future, sometimes undetermined, date.

Lowry and colleagues (2000) recommended that members of online communities set their own deadlines to help them stay motivated. She also recommended having set topics for discussions—unless these discussions are occurring in the informal spaces of the community—to

keep the community members on task. If the teacher does not have assigned topics for discussion, the community members can decide on these topics and choose who will fill the rotating role as moderator. Just as in physical communities, members of a virtual community can offer to give peer critiques of assignments, which would require self-imposed deadlines so that students stay on schedule in order and are prepared to have their work critiqued.

Summary

Online learning is a trend that is definitely not going away as distance learning is firmly entrenched in the United States educational system (NCES, 2003). Because thousands of students are flocking to online classes and academic programs, there is danger of these students feeling disenfranchised, isolated, and unsupported in their learning. The best method to address these difficulties is through an active and effective online learning community, but instructors cannot build these communities alone. The success of an online community hinges on the actions of its members and their efforts to build it. As Palloff and Pratt (2003) have written,

The virtual student needs to accept the different role of the instructor online and recognize that the deepest learning in an online course comes from interacting with everyone involved. Reaching that level of understanding, and being willing to take on responsibility for creating the learning community as a result, is critical to its formation (p. 20).

The guidelines in this article can help students understand what it means to learn in an online community, and what the community should expect of them. This will help learners to hopefully get past simply having an "experience that is shared" and progress towards something much more meaningful: "creat[ing] a shared experience" (McLellan 1997; Schrage 1990).