**On Becoming An Online Learning Community**

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“We are not here to compete with each other, we are here to complete each other. Together we will get it done.” Angelica Safanova & Deborah Nagler

Introduction

Nagler’s (2009) research suggests that there are five key design elements for online learning communities. Successful communities were found to be:

* Portable and accessible
* Task and project orientated
* Social and collaborative
* Interdependent and democratic, and
* Structured and supported

Learning communities can thrive in many different types of environments. However, not every graduate cohort becomes a learning community, even if it is constructed along the lines of the rubric described above. A true learning community is the result of connective tissue that is built around and between the usual online learning features. The following paragraphs will seek to explain how the Educational Technology Leadership Cohort 2 (EDTC 17) learning community operates in relation to the general program and course structure provided by the Educational Technology Department.

Accessibility

Online courses are typically built in an LMS, which offers features for communication and collaboration between students, in addition to access to course materials. Not all LMS products are mobile-friendly and navigation numerous steps. Early in the program, EDTC students adopted a communication application that could be used to supplement online communication in Blackboard. Whatsap is a free, mobile, texting application that offers the user instantaneous message alerts and on-demand access. A main group serves overall communication purposes, while smaller sub-groups have been created for specific tasks or group work. Not only is Whatsap portable and easy to use, but also it has made the EDTC 17 students accessible to one another nearly 24/7.

Task Orientation

Assessments, assignments, projects, presentations, and papers are the regular fare of a doctoral program. Some of these are to be found in the course syllabi, some in emails or the discussion boards, while still others emerge from faculty to student or student to student interactions. The sum of the parts, it might be observed, is a long to do list. The supplemental communication within the EDTC 17 community has been critical in helping to clarify points of instruction, due dates, and additional resources. In addition to Whatsap conversations, the group uses IM, Googledoc, Dropbox, and email for sharing. For example, a collection of shared folders in Googledoc is being used for textbook summaries in preparation for Summer II comprehensive exams.

Collaboration

Participants in the learning community “should be engaged through interpersonal interaction” (Nagler, 2009, p. 21). One of the most important points with regard to building social and collaborative connection is that of intentionality. Building community must be an explicit goal. This program began with icebreakers at the Summer Institute. Paired or small group activities peppered the weeklong program. The students received a clear message that cohort connections are important.

Those first collaborative experiences set the stage for building a continuing connection. The intentionality of the professors became the intentionality of the group leaders, who then pressed the point with the group members. Face-to-face meet-ups in coffee shops and in online venues encouraged social connection. One member produced an online group calendar featuring course deadlines and student birthdays.

Differences in style, culture, availability, research and writing skills, and general understanding of the task are all a part of the learning curve of collaborative work. EDTC 17 was no exception. Two Fall 2015 collaborative assessments certainly challenged the group’s hubris. Humor and shared goals helped us to coalesce and emerge stronger from these tasks. Along the way we were aided by a number of technology tools, including Skype, Mendeley (a collaborative document sharing application), Googledoc, and Voice thread. In more recent collaboration, Google Hangout and Google groups are being added to the mix.

Interdependence

“The potential contribution and unique strengths of each learner should be tapped for the benefit of the community” (Nagler, 2009. P. 21). Differences, as mentioned above, can make things more challenging. Yet differences can also make things better. Diversity is an asset. When one student brings content; another brings skills; a third an eye for design or detail; and a fourth APA talent (a valuable commodity) the end result is that the entire cohort benefits.

In this researcher’s opinion, community interdependence is completely value-driven:

* It requires respect. Luckily it is not difficult to respect the members of a group of intelligent, highly accomplished, and intelligent colleagues.
* It requires trust. One of the reasons that the Whatsap conversation is so successful is that students feel free to express themselves without fear of judgment by either professors or peers.
* It requires kindness. There is an unspoken contract between the members of the group that Whatsap communications will be constructive and supportive. Cohort members who are feeling overly stressed or frustrated can share these feelings. The response is always a kind word or an offer of assistance.

Support

The final and perhaps most important ingredient in a successful learning community is leadership. The talent, commitment, and generosity of community members truly provide the scaffolding on which all of the other activity rests. These are the individuals who take time to set up collaborative applications for group use or those who answer other members’ questions. Also included are the volunteers who write up and share notes from online class meetings or summarize assignment due dates for the group. These are the members who post inspirational messages in Instagram and welcome members back to Whatsap every day with a cheery good morning.

There is no single student leader in this learning community – only a collection of individuals who take turns stepping out of their own work commitments to attend to the needs of others. As time passes, additional community members move from minimal to active participation in the cohort’s learning community. Perhaps they are moved by the growing momentum and perceived value of participation. Admittedly, there are a few outliers and lurkers, but total disengagement is not present in any of the members.

In addition, there is no particular structure for the learning community outside of the LMS. Each of the technologies we adopt is ad hoc and may be abandoned in favor of a more effective one. The need for freedom; to choose, to move, and to experiment with communication and collaboration technologies is another reason that the LMS cannot fulfill all of the needs of a dynamic learning community.

Conclusion

The learning community within this cohort has a mission. Simply stated it is that no member will be left behind. This mission is addressed with intention and commitment, with generosity, and a constructive spirit. A school can assemble a cohort, but only the cohort members themselves can build a learning community. The program can include icebreakers and collaborative projects, but only the cohort members can complete the process and build a functioning community. A school can state that a learning community is its goal, but only the cohort members can act with intentionality and make that goal happen.

References

Nagler, D. (2009). *Maximizing communication and collaboration in a professional learning community-using web 2.0*. Unpublished master’s thesis. Full Sail University, Winter Park, Florida.