

# Designing for Community in Online Learning Settings

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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.<sup>1</sup> Also relevant to the discussion are situated learning theory, self-regulation, and transactional distance.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> *Learning communities* are made up of people, purpose, and a process that ultimately leads to reflection and transformation.<sup>7</sup> *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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> Rovai

found when a sense of connection was established, learners were more likely to persist, and there was greater potential for commitment and cooperation among learners, as well as satisfaction with group efforts.<sup>16</sup> To some degree, this is because communities provide learners with the opportunity to extend and deepen their learning, to test out new ideas in a supportive setting, and to receive critical and constructive feedback.<sup>17</sup>

Since there is a transactional distance between learners and their peers and between learners and their instructor, 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.<sup>18</sup> To bridge this distance, instructors must provide ample opportunities for learners to interact with them 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.<sup>19</sup> *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-Trayner contended that community requires various modes of belonging: engagement, alignment, imagination, and identification.<sup>20</sup> *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 their 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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).<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> In this context, the learner must demonstrate both self-efficacy and effort, as well as time- and task-management skills.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

As indicated in the introduction, radical change theory is rooted in three primary digital-age principles: interactivity, connectivity, and access.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> *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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

Boettcher and Conrad divide online courses into four stages: course beginnings, early middle, late middle, and closing weeks or course ends.<sup>34</sup> Borrowing concepts from the community of inquiry model, levels of community, and dimensions of community,<sup>35</sup> for each stage Boettcher and Conrad offer specific tips to accomplish course goals. In table 2.1, we highlight some of those tips as they relate to building community and offer some of our own. We also demonstrate

**Table 2.1.** Fostering and Sustaining Community throughout a Course

<b>Course Phase and Goal</b>	<b>Digital-Age Principle Emphasized</b>	<b>Related Instructor Activities</b>
<p><b>Course Beginnings</b>  <b>Goal:</b> To lay groundwork for a learning community in which learners and instructors support one another as they move toward course goals.</p>	Connectivity Access	<p>Help learners to get to know each other, to understand the course structure, and to locate course resources.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post a getting-acquainted discussion question before the course begins that relates to the course topic, and ask learners to both introduce themselves and connect with each other.</li> <li>• Model desired communication practices.</li> <li>• Include a forum in which learners can engage with each other informally during and outside of the course.</li> <li>• Provide learners with online access to essential course materials, including those used during direct instruction and independent practice. Designate all other materials as supplemental.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Early Middles</b>  <b>Goal:</b> For learners to become deeply engaged in the content, thus laying the foundation for more complex learning (e.g., projects) and the development of learning communities.</p>	Connectivity	<p>Promote learner interaction with each other, with you, and with the course materials.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assign small-group work project.</li> <li>• Provide supportive and corrective feedback.</li> <li>• Help learners to understand the course materials and to connect ideas. Do this by designing and participating in meaningful discussions that support critical inquiry.</li> <li>• Introduce major course projects and guide learners in making those projects (or other multistep independent practice) personally relevant based on their skills, interests, and needs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Late Middles</b>  <b>Goal:</b> For learners to begin applying learned concepts to scenarios, case studies, issues, etc. with their community.</p>	Interactivity	<p>Boost interactivity as a way to keep learners motivated and promote higher levels of community.            Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have learners, in groups, propose discussion questions that dig deeper into the course content and require the use of resources outside of the course.</li> <li>• Allow learners to reply to discussions using text, photos, and videos. Then, have groups lead or monitor class discussion or submissions about their question.</li> <li>• Assign a discussion or activity that requires learners to adopt different roles within their groups to collectively and successfully accomplish a task.</li> <li>• Have learners share (or construct) their course project (or other multistep independent practice) in a discussion thread for other learners to see and comment on.</li> <li>• Incorporate other social networking tools (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, etc.) as part of the course.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Course Ends</b>  <b>Goal:</b> For learners to have a positive experience and to identify the knowledge and skills they have gained while supporting both the community's and personal goals.</p>	Connectivity Access Interactivity	<p>Help learners meaningfully integrate what they have learned and obtain the highest level of community.            Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In discussions, and as a class or in small groups, have learners grapple with a real-world issue or problem related to the content. Encourage brainstorming, and have learners respectfully challenge others' ideas. Guide them toward solutions or resolutions.</li> <li>• In discussions, have learners share relevant experiences that support future networking and professional collaboration. Supplement these discussions as needed.</li> </ul>

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 2.1 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.<sup>36</sup> Also, we recognize not all librarians will be teaching multisection courses; therefore, instructors would have to modify activities accordingly, as well as expectations about the level of community to be reached.<sup>37</sup> Whatever the course length, Boettcher and Conrad remind 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.<sup>38</sup>

## 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.”<sup>39</sup> Attempting to foster community is particularly important due to the transactional distance both learners and instructors may feel in virtual learning environments.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> As a result, “nurturing a learning community as part of a course is almost as important as being present for your learners.”<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> In doing so, the librarian instructor is not only a director of content, but also a facilitator of learning.

## Notes

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