Building Community in the Online Classroom

As teachers, we've all heard the valued buzz words and phrases—active learning, student-centered learning, problem-based learning, teacher as facilitator, democratic classroom, and so on. These words and the concepts they represent are important, but their importance becomes even greater in the online learning environment where the sense of community doesn't necessarily come naturally but, instead, must be fostered proactively. In the online classroom, the teacher takes on the role of community builder.

Practical Strategies for Building Community

- **SMALL GROUP COLLABORATION**—The small group is the building block of the larger community in the online classroom. Establishing standing learner groups of three or four members from the beginning of the course, gives the learners an immediate sense of belonging, a valuable set of resources in the class, and a sense of shared responsibility/group accountability. Tell learners that they are responsible not only for their own success in the course but for the success of the groupmates.

- **PUBLIC-JOURNALING (A.K.A. BLOGGING)**—Providing each learner with his or her own online journal (or blog) offers the student the opportunity to establish a stronger sense of his or her own identity online while engaging in less-formal, but sustained, pieces of writing for a public audience. The public nature of the online journal encourages learners to be aware of and accountable to their audience.

- **REAL-TIME ONLINE MEETINGS (A.K.A. CHATTING)**—Occasional (perhaps optional) online meetings conducted through the course chat room helps some students overcome feelings of "distance" sometimes experienced in the largely asynchronous communication forum of the online class. Students are encouraged to call their own chat sessions with or without the instructor's presence. One option is to require students lead at least one online meeting for their peers over the course of the semester.

- *DISCUSSION*-**BASED DISCUSSION BOARDS**—The discussion board is best used as a place for informal classroom *discussion*—not as a place for students to post their carefully scripted responses to homework. The threaded-discussion format of an online discussion board invites less-formal "chatty" kinds of exchanges. This is not a bad thing. The discussion board is the online equivalent of a classroom discussion where people say what's on their minds in response to the instructor's prompt and in response to what their peers are saying. Attempts to formalize what a discussion post should look and sound like will work to shut down natural discussion in the classroom. Discussion posts should not be graded any more than one would grade a comment that someone makes during a traditional, face-to-face class meeting. Active participation should be encouraged (and graded perhaps). Consider requiring that a learner post a response to the discussion prompt and then respond to at least three of his or her peers' responses. (The idea is to encourage lively discussion, not to count posts.)

- **STUDENT-LED COLLABORATIVE PRESENTATIONS AND CO-AUTHORED WORK**—Treat the online classroom as a place where knowledge is *created* not merely disseminated or even discovered. Treat learners as scholars who have the capacity to put their minds together—to create synergy—in order to create knowledge on the course of study. Consider having learners work in collaborative groups to conduct scholarly research, engage in scholarly debate, synthesize ideas, co-author sustained works of scholarly inquiry, and present their new and evolving knowledge to the larger community of their online class for public discussion and scrutiny.

- **USE OF A "WHO'S WHO?" PAGE**—Sometimes something as simple as putting a face with a name (and a personality) can go a long way in building connections amongst participants in the online community. Consider creating a page where students can see a photo and brief bio for each learner in the class.

- **INTERDEPENDENT STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS**—Design projects that require learners to work with each other's work, so that work builds on work that came before it and so that work depends on the work of others. Consistently designing assignments in this manner works to tighten the course—pulling its members together in mutual reliance—while it logically connects the body of work the community is working to create.

- **FREE DISCUSSION AREAS (DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST)**—Community involves, in part, diverse individuals coming together to share interests and to work towards a common goal. Creating a "free space" where learners can discuss whatever they want—relevant to the course of study or not—can help develop community. Allow "communities of interest" to emerge to help cement community connections. If they feel connected with one another in some way, the likelihood that learners can work together successfully will increase.

I am always looking to discuss matters of online learning and to exchange some ideas. If you'd like more information on the ideas presented here of if you'd just like to chat about teaching online, shoot me an e-mail or give me a call. Thanks.

Mike McGuire
mcguirem72@morainevalley.edu
708.974.5770