

Developing a Sense of Community in Online Classes

Much has been written about how, or even whether, it is possible to develop community among students in online learning contexts.

The general consensus is that the development of community among online learners can indeed be facilitated by the way in which lecturers design and deliver online courses.

One of the most helpful articles on this topic I have come across recently is by Brent Hege, from Butler University: Brent Hege, "The Online Theology Classroom: Strategies for Engaging a Community of Distance Learners in a Hybrid Model of Online Education", *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 14 (1), January 2011, p.13-20.

Hege suggests that the creation of a safe and vibrant virtual community is an essential component of successful online education. Here are his strategies for successfully developing community for online learners:

1. Resist the temptation to translate.

It is tempting, Hege suggests for instructors to attempt to replicate as nearly as possible the traditional classroom model across to the online

context. But this simply doesn't work, because form actually does matter in learning. Hege says that form matters as much as content. "Form matters precisely because the learning that happens in any course is inextricably bound up with the means by which the learning process is facilitated and encouraged, and this is especially the case in online courses." (p.14)



Lecturers therefore need to give careful consideration to the design of online courses; thinking about how to accomplish the objectives of each course in its specific context.

2. Ensuring Engagement

Distance and online learning fundamentally alter the dynamics of time and space in the educational process. Teachers and learners share neither one physical location nor one period of time, and interaction is spread across many spaces and many moments. This means that lec-

turers need to give attention to considering how to ensure consistent student engagement in the online context.

Hege describes his experiences in attempting to encourage student engagement. He required students to post weekly reflections on the reading, reasoning that this would allow students the opportunity to discuss texts, ask questions and learn from one another. Some students found the requirement unreasonable, while others were wary of putting their thoughts in writing for fellow students to see, or intimidated by the task. The requirement to post written reflections did not easily result in consistent student engagement, though it was eventually successful. Hege describes how he needed to carefully nurture a safe and trusting environment for students in which they could contribute and learn together.

3. Creating and Sustaining a Community of Engagement

Sustained engagement with the course material requires a high degree of trust and

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Further Reading

For more on developing community online:

Edelstein, S. & Edwards, J. 'If you Build It, They Will Come: Building Learning Communities Through Threaded Discussions', *Online Journal Of Distance Learning Administration*, 5 (1), Spring 2002. Available: <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/spring51/edelstein51.html>

Nichols, M., 2009, *Online Discourse - No. 4 in e-Primer series*. Available: <http://akoaooteaoroa.ac.nz/project/eprimer-series/resources/pages/online-discourse-eprimer-series>

Palloff, R. & Pratt, K. *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2007 Available for loan from the SCD Office.

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comfort between students and the instructor and between the students themselves. This is necessary to help develop meaningful dialogue, personal interaction and growth. Some of the strategies Hege has successfully used in online classes to help develop a level of trust and comfort include:

Creating an online space for introductions:

This allows students to introduce themselves to each other, or reconnect with other students they have been in classes with previously. It also allows the lecturer to introduce him/herself. This might be done through a short video introduction which can serve both as a personal introduction and an introduction to the course material.

The introductory space can also be used as an opportunity for students to practice the skills needed for online learning such as making posts, adding attachments, or tak-

ing part in online discussions. This enables the lecturer to detect students competency in using the required technologies and address any issues quickly.

Creating an online space for discussion of unit expectations:

Hege suggests that students also need time and space to participate in discussion of the requirements of the unit, to ensure they understand what is required of them, and to begin to establish frank and open communication about subject expectations and how the online unit will work.

Developing social presence: is another important element in building community. Social presence is a term used to describe the way in which individuals present themselves as real people in an online context. Both students and instructors need to develop their social presence to enable the de-

velopment of community through trust and genuine interaction. Hege suggests instructor presence can be developed via regular monitoring of online discussions and posts. He suggests it is important for the instructor to maintain a visible online presence throughout the teaching period. This doesn't mean that the instructor needs to respond to all posts; his/her role is to facilitate and guide the contributions and interactions of the students.

Hege has a number of other suggestions for developing sustained and lively engagement among students and building an online community of learners in his article, which is worth a look. For further reading on this topic, see box on left.

What have been your experiences of developing a sense of community in online classes? What works well in your context? Share your thoughts in the next edition of this newsletter.

Spotlight on SCD Professional Development for Online Learning

Are you looking for some support, training, resources or ideas for your online teaching?

In 2011 we are scheduling extra opportunities for Professional Development specifically focused on online teaching.

On each SCD Professional Development Day for the remainder of this year, there will be an extra (optional) workshop session in the morning on online teaching issues.

The dates of the remaining PD Days are:
Monday 16 May
Friday 9 Sept
Monday 24 Oct

The online learning workshops will take place on these dates from 10-12:30am. So put these times in your diaries now.

Online and virtual learning options available

You can attend these workshops either in person in Sydney, or virtually by web-conferencing. We will also

make recordings and resources from the sessions available online for faculty to access after the event.

The next seminar on 16 May will focus on "Designing Online Learning for Engagement". This will be an interactive workshop in which faculty can discuss which methods, approaches, techniques or technologies have worked well (or not worked well) in their experiences of online learning.



Spotlight on Teaching: Extending E-learning to the Blogosphere



Glen O'Brien, lectures for Booth College and shares his approach to using student presentations and blogs to stimulate learning in his Apologetics class.

I am teaching *TH312 Christian Apologetics* in both extensive and online formats at Booth College this semester. The first assessment task for the unit asks the student to "describe to the class an objection to the Christian faith that has been put to you by a non-Christian friend and describe how you will seek to enter into dialogue with that person using the skills you are gaining in this unit."

Extensive students gave face-face presentations for this task but online students presented during one of five real time classroom experiences using *Connect Pro*. While students are not required to present a power point presentation, the technology does enable the online student to do so, and one of my students successfully managed this.

The online class provides a space for direct response to student presentations both from the faculty person and fellow students. I was taken by the high standard of some of the student presentations and thought it would be a good idea to post some of these on my blog "[The Batcave](#)"

There are a number of reasons why I thought this was a

good idea (apart from getting material posted on my blog that I didn't have to write myself). The blogosphere is public space opening up the possibility of engaging in real apologetic dialogue with actual people. The platform I use is Blogger which easily enables any reader to make a comment. While the few comments that have been left so far have been positive ones from believers, the students may find themselves in a situation where they are responding to real objections and needing to articulate their responses. The potential to connect learning with life and theory with practice certainly exists in this model, though I doubt that anything will ever replace real flesh and blood encounters.

Another positive aspect of this approach is that it's a great encouragement to students. They have expressed genuine delight that their writing has been 'published' in this way and they feel affirmed regard-

ing the value of their work and of themselves as students. I have needed to edit the material they have forwarded to me so that it has had the sharper and more succinct shape that suits a blog post. I have also given the students the option of remaining anonymous. None have requested this though we have hidden the identity of the people who were their dialogue partners, to protect their privacy.

The Booth College administration then took the initiative of posting status updates on the College's [Facebook page](#) with links to the Apologetics posts giving the material a much wider audience.



Glen O'Brien

If you would like to read any of these posts here are the links:

The Use of Religious Experience as an Apologetic Method:

<http://glenobrien.blogspot.com/2011/04/use-of-religious-experience-as.html>

Is God Responsible for Evil?:

<http://glenobrien.blogspot.com/2011/04/is-god-responsible-for-evil.html>

The Christian Basis for Science:

<http://glenobrien.blogspot.com/2011/04/christian-basis-for-science.html>

Booth College Facebook Page: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Booth-College/120907487935942>



Post Office Box 1882
Macquarie Centre
NSW 2113
Web: www.scd.edu.au

Tel: (02) 9889 1969
Fax: (02) 9889 2281
Email: dianeh@scd.edu.au



Can you contribute to this newsletter?

We are looking for examples of good practice, or new, creative or innovative ways that faculty are using to engage students in distance and online learning. These might be examples from your own class, or from others. Send your comments or examples to Diane Hockridge at: dianeh@scd.edu.au.

The next issue will be published in June.

Deadline for contributions will be Friday 10 June.