

Towards The Development of Successful Virtual Learning Communities

Sharon Porterfield

Introduction

The concept of a community as a place where people are bound together geographically has, with the advent of the World Wide Web (WWW), evolved into a concept referring to any group of individuals who socialize, whether it be face to face or through the use of technology. In fact, “nowhere has the mention of community been so ubiquitous as in the virtual world” (Cothrel and Williams, 1999, p.54). Though the term “community” may be broadly applied within terrestrial and virtual realms, its core definition remains constant: all communities deal with people (Boettcher, Duggan, and White, 1999; Cothrel and Williams, 1999; Hamman, undated; Lally and Barrett, 1999; Schwier, in press).

Online communities are a “gathering of people, in an online ‘space’ where they communicate, connect, and get to know each other better over time.” (Boettcher, Duggan, and White, 1999). Such online spaces may include synchronous forums such as chat rooms, or asynchronous forums such as listservers, bulletin boards, and message boards. The purposes of online communities are varied. Some communities result from a desire to discuss an issue of common interest, while others provide a place for social clubs or organizations to plan and coordinate events. An online community may simply be a gathering place where people meet and converse on a regular basis. The concept of online community continues to emerge and develop. Julie Gomell, producer of Excite’s “People and Chat” channel states, “Community is an area that’s very popular right now, yet it is also unproven. That means we get to experiment, which is a lot of fun It’s a constant learning experience” (Ten Tips for Building, undated).

One type of community that has developed as technology has become

increasingly accessible and familiar has been the online, or virtual, learning community. A virtual learning community (VLC) is described as a learning environment “based on shared purpose rather than geography” (Schwier, in press). “Learning” is the key term differentiating a general online community and a virtual learning community (Schwier, 2001,). McLellan (1998) describes a VLC as a place to encourage student participation and collaboration without individual competition. Whether the purpose of the VLC be for corporate staff development or the offering of university courses, the intent of the VLC is to support a community of learners (McLellan, 1998).

While online communities are tailored to fulfill a variety of different purposes, a VLC is tailored to emphasize learning, yet both types of community have similar characteristics leading to their success. The purpose of this paper is examine characteristics which describe the development, maintenance and evaluation of a successful virtual learning community.

Developing a Successful VLC

Peter Kollock (1996, p.1) laments:

What makes for a successful learning community is often poorly understood. At this time, the tendency of those involved in building graphical virtual worlds is to create visually compelling worlds that look good, but do a poor job of fostering social interaction. Many of these communities have more in common with lonely museums than with the vibrant communities they set out to create.

The creation of a vibrant, meaningful learning community requires more than posting a course outline, readings, and assignments to the World Wide Web. As Kollock states, a VLC must be designed to include social interaction amongst the participants, a factor considered critically important to a VLC’s success (Ten Tips for Building, undated;

Cothrel and Williams, 1999; Kimball, 1995; Lally and Barrett, 1999; Schwier, in press; White, 2000;). In fact, social exchanges by individual students are an important part of the formal, group interaction. They help build a sense of trust and respect among the community members. (Lally and Barrett, 1999; Winner-White and Shields, undated). Cothrel and Williams (1999, p.57) observe “that socializing may be part of the glue that holds the [VLC] together. After all, we socialize and talk about personal matters ‘in place,’ why not ‘in space’?”. Computer-mediated instruction, the kind of instruction delivered by a VLC, is dependent upon the communication of the participants. The fostering of interaction among members of a VLC is essential. In order to obtain success, the first considerations of a VLC must be its organization, intent, and structure.

Organization: Drawing the Blueprints

A number of key criteria have been identified that lend themselves to the success of a virtual learning community. First, one must determine why the VLC format is chosen over a more traditional teaching approach (Mason and Hart, undated). Is computer-mediated instruction the best way to facilitate communication, or would a regular classroom lend itself better to student interaction? A VLC may be a preferred mode of instruction for a course that encourages collaborative thinking and decision-making, rather than a course that simply requires a content expert to dispense information.

A second consideration is the location of the students expected to participate in the VLC. Do the students live within the same geographic area, making face-to-face meetings an option, or do the students encompass a great geographic area necessitating only computer-mediated interactions? When developing a VLC, one must be aware of members who may communicate exclusively through electronic means (Uber-Grosse and Leto, 1999). Further to this consideration is the issue of time zones. If synchronous

discussions are to be part of the VLC format, thought must be given to the time differences between students, so scheduled events permit maximum participation (Boettcher, 1999; White, 2000).

Third, one must think about the location from which the students will be accessing the VLC and the technological competency of each student (Boettcher, 1999; McLellan, 1998). Some students may use their work environment, while others may access the VLC from their home. Work environments typically use Windows-based computers, and have up-to-date equipment, technical support, and high speed internet connections. Home-based users typically use Macintosh computers, less up-to-date equipment, and slower internet connections (Boettcher, 1999). A VLC may prove quite frustrating to the home user if graphics take minutes, rather than seconds, to download, or if computer failures cause synchronous activities to be missed.

Intent: Laying the Foundation

The intent of a VLC is, simply, to provide a computer-mediated forum of learning through active member involvement. Schwier (in press) states, “VLC’s utilize the idea of ‘community’ as a starting point for discussion and interaction among learners.” A VLC must “engage and involve members” (Cothrel and Williams, 1999, p.55) as this creates value and a sense of ownership, and this sense of belonging is essential to achieving a high level of student interaction. Lally and Barrett (1999) believe effective VLC’s may be best operated within the framework of cooperative learning. Furthermore, they believe VLC members must have some degree of commitment to the group, and to the cooperative principles functioning therein. Thus, besides providing a learning focus, the intent of a VLC must also include ways of engaging its students.

To establish the intent, one needs to determine the target goals and the audience for which VLC is developed (Kimball, 1995; Mason and Hart, undated; White, 2000).

The expectations of the course must be explicitly stated to ensure students enrolling in the VLC know what is expected of them (Mason and Hart, undated). The instructor also benefits from the provision of a clear purpose as it helps to determine the structure of the course and the resources required (White, 2000). Students enrolling in a course with the expectations stated at the start have the opportunity to decide if the course is of interest to them. If so, these students will likely become active participants of the VLC. To encourage dynamic involvement, Uber-Grosse and Leto (1999) suggest VLC curriculum developers and instructors design assignments that promote student interaction. One may conclude a VLC has met its intent when members are found to be extending their relationships beyond the online discussion space (Cothrel and Williams, 1999). Members may continue their communication through the use of email, telephone conversations, or face to face meetings (if geographically possible) to interact and share knowledge.

Structure: Building the Frame

A VLC requires more than forethought and stated intent to be successful; it also needs structure. Learning communities, like terrestrial communities, call for guidelines to promote positive interactions among community members. Such guidelines may be in the form of a code of conduct explicitly stated within the intent of the VLC. The code of conduct will reflect the type of atmosphere or tone that the community wishes to create (Kimball, 1995; McLellan, 1998).

To set the proper tone of a VLC, it is advantageous to have delineated specific rules or protocol. While some rules may be explicitly stated, such as no personal attacks when giving criticism, others may be more implicit in nature, for example, treat others as you wish to be treated (Cothrel and Williams, 1999; McLellan, 1998). A VLC instructor may choose to incorporate “community building” exercises into the beginning of a course to allow students to get to know each other and learn online protocol (Winner-White and

Shields, undated). Some VLC members may be new to computer-mediated interactions and require some initial latitude in their efforts to communicate with others, while other more seasoned VLC members provide modelling of proper “netiquette” (rules of etiquette utilized online).

The number of participants engaged in a VLC may determine the number of guidelines required by the community. A small group of eight to twelve people may not require a code of conduct as extensive as a community of fifty or more people. Hiltz, cited in Lally and Barrett (1999), recommends fewer than thirty members in any online community, though this number is considered too high by Lally and Barrett. A successful VLC requires enough people to sustain the communication and learning within the community without requiring a plethora of rules to monitor behavior.

Maintaining a Successful VLC

Communication among the participants is a major factor in maintaining a VLC. A community, whether online or terrestrial, cannot survive if its members do not interact with one another. Schwier (in press) suggests:

Creating a community is not simply a matter of creating rules and providing a structure. It is a means of providing a forum to support the natural development of interpersonal relationships. Such a notion is particularly important in VLC’s where the ‘idea of community is used as a rallying point for discussion and interaction among learners’.

The first source of support in the development of interpersonal relationships is the VLC facilitator. The secondary source of support is the the VLC membership itself.

Facilitators: Home Owners

The facilitator of a VLC is the person who sets the tone, enforces the rules, and

nourishes conversation (Kimball, 1995; “Ten Tips to Building”, undated). A facilitator also acts as the host and deals with inappropriate behavior (Kimball, 1995). Just as a homeowner focuses on the needs of the family, so a facilitator focuses on the needs of the community members. This focus is achieved by getting to know the members, the skills they possess, what they need from the community, and what they have to offer through their participation (Cothrel and Williams, 1999). The means by which a facilitator performs these tasks is dependent upon the nature of the individual, but there are some key strategies that enable the facilitator to encourage successful community interactions.

Since the facilitator is usually the first person a participant meets upon joining a VLC, it is important for the facilitator to welcome each student individually and to introduce students to each other as they arrive in the “cyberclassroom”. Once everyone has been introduced, the facilitator ought to maintain a participatory role within the VLC (Guymer, 1999). The facilitator may fill such a participatory role by responding to the entire VLC membership when answering questions. Thus, rather than replying to individual student queries via personal email, the facilitator may choose to respond to the entire group. Providing feedback in this manner helps the other members of the community learn from each other; as it promotes continued interaction between the facilitator and individual students (White and Weight, 2000).

Other ways to encourage interpersonal relationships are through utilizing public and private chat rooms (Guymer, 1999), responding to student queries as they arise during the course (McLellan, 1998), and using participation incentives (Guymer, 1999). Godwin (1994) suggests that learning communities provide some type of “institutional memory” which serves as a permanent record of the events and history of the group. A VLC may wish to provide brief biographies of each student as shared backgrounds encourage closer interpersonal relationships, and knowing more about the other participants increases the likelihood of a student freely sharing information. Guymer

(1999) suggests that a VLC have a place to save and post online tutorials for students who are unable to attend a virtual class. Such a site allows for a student to gather information and prepare for the next scheduled synchronous activity.

Participants: VLC Roommates

The participants of a VLC, once familiar with each other, are integral to sustaining the vibrancy of the community. Whenever engaged in a synchronous activity, members ought to signal their presence to others in the cyberclassroom to foster active participation by everyone (Lally and Barrett, 1999). If the VLC membership is kept to a small number, it is unlikely that any one person will become invisible as the others will be able to apply gentle pressure to encourage interaction by everyone. Though some participants may prefer to observe the discussion without having much personal involvement (commonly referred to as “lurking”), others may find themselves assuming such roles as content expert, mentor, or critic. Cothrel and Williams (1999) note that the willingness of VLC members to take on these roles indicates the community is something people value and wish to remain a part of. These authors have also observed that these informal roles tend to belong to the community, and not to the individuals who fill them. Over the course of time, the faces of the members may change, but the roles within the community will always be filled.

Evaluating a VLC

There are many variables by which the effectiveness of a virtual learning community may be established. Perhaps the most important variables are the users themselves. Since much of the success is dependent upon the development and maintenance of continued interaction among the participants, their feedback should

provide the most valuable insight to the success of the community (Kollock, undated).

Evaluation: Having an Appraisal

The evaluation of a VLC may take many factors into account, but one must ask: by whose standards is the evaluation being conducted? A corporation may consider the learning community built for professional development purposes successful if all employees say they have visited it. A school or university may determine the VLC built to provide a course of instruction is successful if students were regular attenders and achieved a passing grade. Both of these standards are acceptable, depending upon the original intent of the virtual learning community.

Mason and Hart (undated) suggest a list of criteria one may employ to determine the effectiveness of a VLC. The criteria include:

1. Usage rate--did people visit the VLC regularly? What was the frequency of the visitations?
2. Participation rate--did the VLC encourage the majority of the membership to be active participants? Was there regular attendance? Were some members more active than others?
3. User Feedback--what did the VLC members think of their experience? What were the perceived merits and complaints of the VLC as a medium for learning?

These categories provide a basis for evaluation. As VLCs are utilized more extensively, the criteria for developing successful online learning environments will be more clearly delineated.

Conclusion

Many of the characteristics of successful VLCs presented in this paper are

summarized by Jones (2000) in his study of communities of practice. Jones determined that communities are successful when: a) there is a clear identity to the community and its purpose, b) a critical mass of members exists to develop and sustain a knowledge base, c) a focus for discussion of interest to all community members is provided, d) people perceive value in the knowledge sharing and are able to apply it to their direct benefit, e) leaders encouraged knowledge sharing and are active participants, and f) community members are self-motivated. Kollock (undated) considers communities successful when they promote continuous interaction, and Schwier (in press) suggests that “the match between the purpose of the community and the importance to the learner will determine the length of its [VLC] survival and the strength of its influence.”

“Success” is as ubiquitous a term as “community.” Determining the characteristics of a successful learning community in a virtual atmosphere presents quite an challenge to the VLC designer and to the field of education. If VLCs become successful modes of providing education, what impact will VLCs have on the traditional education system? This author suspects there will be little impact. Granted, technology is available to an increasing number of students and the opportunities for online learning increase daily, but learning--whether it be in a traditional classroom or a virtual learning environment-- will always be successful when it facilitates and nourishes social interaction among a group of learners.

Bibliography

Boettcher, S. (1999). What types of virtual learning communities can I build and what tools are available?. Available WWW: [http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitytypes.htm]. Date accessed: 27/10/00

Boettcher, S., Duggan, H., & White, N.(1999). What is a virtual learning community and why would you ever need one?. Available WWW:

[<http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitywhatwhy.htm>]. Date accessed: 27/10/00

Coate, J.(1998). Cyberspace innkeeping: Building online community. Available WWW: [<http://www.sfgate.com/~tex/innkeeping>]. Date accessed: 28/10/00

Cothrel, J., & Williams, R. (1999). On-line communities: Helping them form and grow. Journal of Knowledge Management, 3(1), 54-65.

Guymer, L. (1999). Online teaching: No fear of flying in cyberspace. In S. Hawthorne & R. Klein (Eds.), Cyberfeminism: Connectivity, critique, and creativity (pp.51-79). Melbourne, Australia: SPinifex Press.

Hamman, R. (undated). Introduction to virtual communities research and Cybersociology Magazine, Issue Two. Available WWW: [<http://members.aol.com/Cybersoc/is2intro.html>]. Date accessed: 28/12/00.

Jones, M.(undated). Workshop 4: Research issues in the design of on-line communities. Available WWW: [<http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/workshops/chi/99/participants/jones.html>]. Date accessed 28/12/00.

Kimball, L. (1995). Ten ways to make online learning groups work. Educational Leadership, 53(2), 54-56.

Kollock, P. (undated). Design principles for online communities. Available WWW: [<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/kollock/papers/design.htm>]. Date accessed 27/12/00.

Lally, V., & Barrett, E. (1999). Building a learning community on-line: Toward socio-academic interaction. Research Papers in Education, 14(2), 147-163.

Mason, J., & Hart, G. (undated). Effective use of asynchronous virtual learning communities. Available WWW: [<http://www.arch.usyd.au/kcdc/conferences/VC97/papers/mason.html>]. Date accessed 28/12/00.

McLellan, H. (1998). The internet as a virtual learning community. Journal of Computing in Higher Education, 9(2), 92-112.

Schwier, R.A. (in press). Catalysts, emphases, and elements of virtual learning communities: Implications for research and practice. In press: The Quarterly Review of Distance Education.

Schwier, R.A. (2001). Personal communication.

Uber-Grosse, C. & Leto, L.J. (1999). Virtual communities and networking in distance education. Available WWW: [<http://www.tesol.edu/pubs/articles/tm9902-01.html>]. Date accessed: 04/01/01.

White, K. W., & Weight, B. H. (2000). The online teaching guide: A handbook of attitudes, strategies, & techniques for the virtual classroom. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

White, N. (2000). Defining the purpose of your community. Available WWW: [<http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitypurpose.htm>]. Date accessed: 27/12/00.

Winner-White, T., & Shields, T. (undated). Intergrative introductions: Establishing a learning community for the first semester criminology majors. Available WWW: [<http://horizon.unc.edu/conferences/lc/papers/9.html>]. Date accessed: 07/01/01.