

# Exploring The Concept Of 'Community' In Online Settings

*Dr Donald W. McMurray*

School of Social Sciences, Southern Cross University, Australia

## ABSTRACT

In 2003 a group of students within the School of Social Sciences at Southern Cross University in northern New South Wales who normally take classes on the main campus in face-to-face mode elected to study together online.

This paper represents an attempt to capture their total student experience as well as explore why the online students elected to study in virtual groups as opposed to studying through the more conventional modes.. Results were interpreted from the perspective of a community of practice where the basis for belonging was a shared purpose not shared beliefs or shared values.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last years of the twentieth century Higher Education has been forced to respond to an unprecedented access to information and the challenge of competing in a global knowledge economy. Emerging digital technologies (e.g. e-mail, the World Wide Web and the Internet) have provided Higher Education with the tools to respond to this challenge. Coincident with the application of these e-learning technologies in university settings has been the growth of virtual communities amongst learners who are physically remote from each other. By motivating learners to collaborate and innovate, universities can play a real role in the development of future knowledge workers in organisational settings.

In 1998, the school of Social Sciences at Southern Cross University in northern New South Wales undertook the design of a suite of online units using an action research methodology. Since first semester 1999 when five units were offered completely online, there has been an increase in demand by traditional distance education students wishing to utilise this communication technology. Presently 176 units are being delivered online all of which contain discussion forums and group collaborative work areas. In preparing units for online delivery, there has been a deliberate repositioning of the instructor away from the role of knowledge transmitter to that of facilitator, coach and resource guide. Emphasis is given to engaging the collaboration of the students in creating their own knowledge.

The effectiveness of some online learning activities and the manner in which they encourage interactivity and collaboration in forging a community of practice has been established (McMurray, 2001; McMurray & Dunlop, 2001; McMurray, 2002). Communities of practice describe informal settings in which people learn by doing. It has its epistemological roots in constructivism that assumes meaning is jointly constructed and arises out of ongoing activities of a community of learners. Here knowledge creation as well as action is fundamentally social in origin (Henning 1998).

In preparing initial units for online delivery, there was a repositioning of the instructor away from the role of knowledge transmitter to that of facilitator, coach and resource guide (McMurray & Lucas, 2001). What was to be avoided at all costs was simply Web mounting course material which ignores the unique capabilities of the online learning environment. At the end of each semester units were evaluated to assess the efficacy of online learning. Initial feedback (Hayden, Saenger & Parry, 1999) showed that while distance learning students value the interaction with and access to the lecturer, they found collaboration with each other to be problematic, especially where it led to a shared grade.

It was decided to pay more attention to each learner's basic communication needs when operating in a group. Computer supported communication is devoid of important social cues that are important for message validation and, therefore, the building up of trust (Collins & Berge 1996). Moreover, according to Dunlop and Scott (2001), online groups need sufficient time to become acquainted with each other and develop cohesion (King 1999) as well as the necessary social protocols. Only then can successful collaboration take place which, in turn, can lead to the facilitation of shared meaning (Allen & Griffith 1997).

Following this there has been a deliberate attempt to establish a community of practice concept in online settings similar to that established amongst academic developers during the design phase of the University's Online Project (Ellis & Phelps, 1999). Communities of practice describe informal settings in which people learn by doing. It has its epistemological roots in constructivism which assumes meaning is jointly constructed and arises out of ongoing activities of a community of learners. Here knowledge as well as action is fundamentally social in origin (Henning 1998). Stamps (1997) claims that communities of practice are not actually created but emerge as a function of people becoming united as they work collaboratively towards a common goal.

In 2000, with the online launch of an undergraduate unit entitled *Organisational Communication*, it was once again decided to focus on a requirement for the students to interact and collaborate. In previous units of study the setting up learner centred

groups had been undertaken by the instructor. In this iteration, however, the process of organising themselves into groups was left entirely to the students, including the naming of their virtual organisations. This was an unhurried process that occupied the first two to three weeks of the semester and produced a number of communicative activities, ranging from one-to-one dialogues using email and the telephone to the use of the discussion area inside the course delivery shell by the whole group. Very little instructor-to-learner communication occurred at this stage and this proved to be beneficial for the groups in forging a sense of community amongst themselves.

Once the online groups were established the asynchronous chat room quickly became the vehicle for conducting and archiving discussions. Many exchanges occurred between the two organisations as members explored boundaries and developed a sense of cohesion in and around their new 'organisation'. Initially these discussions were almost exclusively social and yet the creation of this social community served as an important bridge to the formation of the academic community that was to follow.

The evaluation of *Organisational Communication* at the conclusion of semester 2, 2000 confirmed the growing appeal that online learning holds for distance education students. The frequency of visits to the student discussion areas in this unit was almost three times as great as that recorded in two earlier surveys (McMurray & Dunlop 2000). It is contended that this increased interactivity was a product of the community building that took place at the outset of the unit. What began essentially as social interaction transformed into exchanges of a more academic nature. The students could see the merit in interacting with each other in this way. Eighty-six per cent of students rated the real-time chat sessions with other students as having "great value" or "very great value" (Newton & Ledgerwood 2000). In its virtual chat room *CourseInfo* records threads of conversation as online discourse in a way that allows every thought to be captured for future examination, reflection and extension by their peers (Owston 1997). The result is richer, more thoughtful discussions arising out of shared understandings which in turn contribute to a different kind of knowledge building from that which students are able to accomplish on their own.

### **Exploring Communities on the Web**

In 2003 one group of students studying *Organisational Communication* elected to study completely online despite being full-time on campus students. From the outset the instructor once again maintained a relatively low profile while the group set about the business of developing their community of practice. While the instructions were clearly stated in the unit outline, control of the decision making process concerning how unit objectives were to be achieved was placed in the hands of students.

Interestingly this type of instructor style was interpreted by one of the students as being somewhat laissez faire.

Towards the end of the unit students were surveyed to ascertain what happens when students congregate to provide mutual support for their learning. The instrument used was designed to reflect perceptions of organisational climate. Moran and Volkwein (1992, p. 20) see organisational climate as relatively enduring characteristic of an organization which embodies perceptions about how the organization is viewed with respect to the following dimensions:

- Autonomy
- Trust
- Cohesiveness
- Support
- Recognition
- Innovation
- Fairness

Further, it is produced by member interaction and serves as a basis for interpreting situations. Because it reflects the norms, beliefs, values and attitudes of the organization it exerts a significant influence in shaping behaviour.

At the same time, students studying face-to-face were also surveyed as to their perceptions about the climate as determined by their learning mode. Differences were found between the two groups with respect to 'cohesion', 'support' and 'trust'. For example, only 37% of face-to-face students reported feelings of cohesion with the school or their fellow students as compared with 90% of online students. Similarly, almost twice as many online students felt supported in the studies as compared to face-to-face students.

Overall, the results provided evidence for the existence of a healthy climate amongst the online group that was not found in the face-to-face mode. It is suggested that these factors are important requisites to the formation of a community of learners and are themselves the products of sustained interaction and collaboration.

Many online students reported growing feelings of trust, cohesion and support as they forged their online learning communities. These perceptions were widely shared and, as noted, collectively aggregated around the concept of organisational climate. Redding (1972) claims that the climate of an organization is more important than are the communication skills and techniques of organisational members in creating an effective organisation. Climate, according to Turnipseed (1988), may be an empiricist substitute for culture. It is suggested that the culture of an online

community, if not co-extensive with a community of practice concept, shares many of the same attributes.

### **Building Learning Communities On The Web**

The rest of this paper details the activities that were designed to assist students develop key attributes of organisational climate and at the same time form a virtual community of learners through Web-based interaction and collaboration. It must be stressed, however, that online learning needs to be viewed as a process and not just a sequence of structured activities. In the spring semester 2003 the following activities were used to foster a healthy organisational climate and promote a community of practice.

To begin with, the students were invited to develop their personal home page as a prelude to forming their own virtual organisations. Communicative activities flowing out of this exercise were thought to be instrumental in building up levels of trust, cohesion and support. Adequate time must be allotted for this important community building step if successful collaboration is to take place.

The primary task of the students was to design a project of sufficient complexity to sustain their interest and effort over the course of the semester. Along the way the project was interspersed with a requirement for a number of progress reports. Students were provided with synchronous and asynchronous communication tools along with a range of pedagogical resources to assist in the building of a collaborative learning environment. As noted earlier, the design of activities and tasks for the online learners is heavily influenced by the constructivist paradigm. Thus, the process of knowledge construction was fostered through reciprocally engaged student learning activities.

From the outset, there was a deliberate attempt to provide an environment that is intimate, inviting and authentic. If interaction and collaboration are to occur this online environment should be protected from outside criticism and interference (Hill, 2001). Learners working on assigned online tasks engage in social as well as intellectual tasks. For example, the Virtual Chat Room provides for real-time contact much of which is socially oriented. These interactive exchanges are seen to be fundamental to the process of collaboration.

For collaboration to be truly successful, the learning environment should be structured by the participants themselves. This includes reaching agreement about shared goals as well as the purpose of the collaborative enterprise. This problem-based interactivity within the learning environment can lead to an enhanced sense of community (Cadieux, 2002).

While the online learner is seen as semi-autonomous in so far as control of the dialogue with the unit instructor it is important the instructor be more than the 'guide on the side'. As instructor, it is important to provide the human touch by visiting the chat rooms, staging teleconferences, recording audio messages and sending e-mails.

Finally, students were encouraged to keep a personal diary where they recorded thoughts regarding their ongoing communication experiences. The prime objective here is to encourage students to reflect on their own learning and to analyse these metacognitive activities for future reference (Callaert, 2002). Confidentiality and immediate feedback are key assurances. The electronic diary can form part of the assessment regime. Some students complain that not all contributions to team based assessment are equitable. In order to address this problem a combination of peer, self and instructor evaluation can be employed. It is also thought that this combination would lead to greater collaboration amongst team members (Leader, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

The landscape continues to evolve and in many higher education institutions we have witnessed a move from faculty centred research communities to student-centred learning communities. This paper has traced the emergence of a community of practice concept amongst students studying completely online.

It is concluded that the establishment of a virtual community of practice involving common goals and a desire to learn from each other are key drivers behind the success of online learning. Technology, in and of itself, does not foster collaboration. As Adams and Freeman (2000) found, the establishment of a community of practice serves the purpose of supplying the necessary human infrastructure for the joint creation of knowledge with the Web providing the technological tool.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, E. C. & Freeman, C. (2000). Communities of practice: Bridging technology and knowledge assessment. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 4 (1), 38-44.
- Allen, D. & Griffith, R. (1997). Vertical and lateral information processing: The effects of gender, employee classification level and media richness on communication and work outcomes, *Human Relations*, 50, (10), 23-31.
- Cadieux, C. (2002). Assessing sense of classroom community in an urban community college online setting. In M. Driscoll & T. C. Reeves (Eds.), *Proceedings of E-Learn 2002*. October, AACE: Montreal.

Callaert, H. (2002). The impact of ANE-learning environment on students' self and peer assessment. In M. Driscoll & T. C. Reeves (Eds.), *Proceedings of E-Learn 2002*. October, AACE: Montreal.

Collins, M. & Berge, Z. (1996). Facilitating interaction in computer mediated online courses. Paper presented at the Florida State University Distance Education

Conference, Tallahassee, FL, June.

<http://star.ucc.nau.edu/~mauri/moderate/flcc.html>.

Dunlop, M. and D. Scott. (2001). An Examination of the Impact of Aspects of Online Education Delivery on Students. In A. Treloar, and A. Ellis. (Eds.). *AusWeb01, Proceedings of The Seventh Australian World Wide Web Conference* Southern Cross University Press: Lismore, pp. 269-283.

Ellis, A. & Phelps, R. (1999). Staff development for online delivery: A collaborative team-based action learning model.

Hayden, M., Saenger, H. & Parry, S. (1999). *An evaluation of online units delivered in first semester 1999 at Southern Cross University*. Report compiled by *The Teaching and Learning Centre*. Southern Cross University: Lismore, NSW.

Henning, P. H. (1998). Ways of learning: An ethnographic study of the work and situated learning of a group of refrigeration technicians. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. 27 (1), 85-136.

Hill, J. R. (2001). Building community in web-based learning environments: Strategies and techniques. Paper presented at *Ausweb 01 – Seventh Australian World Wide Web Conference*, Coffs Harbour, NSW. April.

King, K. (1999). Group dynamics for the online professor. Paper presented at *AusWeb99, Fifth Australian World Wide Web Conference*, Southern Cross University, Ballina, April,  
[http://ausweb.scu.edu.au/aw99\\_archive/aw99/papers/king/paper.html](http://ausweb.scu.edu.au/aw99_archive/aw99/papers/king/paper.html).

Leader, L. (2002). Peer and self-evaluation for improving student collaboration in online courses. In M. Driscoll & T. C. Reeves (Eds.), *Proceedings of E-Learn 2002*. October, AACE: Montreal.

McMurray, D. (2001). Creating virtual communities of practice online through action research. A conference paper delivered at *Bringing Information Technology to Education*, Eindhoven, 22 -24 November, Eindhoven University of Technology.

McMurray, D. & Dunlop, M. (2001). The collaborative aspects of on-line learning: A pilot study. In A. Pandian (Ed.), *Technologies of Learning: Learning Through and about the New Information Technologies*, Sydney: Common Ground Publishing.

McMurray, D. & Lucas, T. (2001). Collaborative learning as a function of students' organising and communicating. In M. Wallace, A. Ellis & D. Newton (Eds.) *Moving Online II: A Conference to Explore the Challenges for Workplaces, Colleges and Universities, Conference Proceedings*, Lismore, NSW: Southern Cross University.

McMurray, D. (2002). The psychological dimensions of online learning – an in-depth case study. In M. Driscoll & T. C. Reeves (Eds.), *Proceedings of E-Learn 2002*. October, AACE: Montreal.

Moran, E. T. & Volkwein, J. F. (1992). The cultural approach to the formation of organizational climate. *Human Relations*, 45(1), 19-46

Newton, D. & Ledgerwood, T. (2000). School of social & workplace development online student feedback survey, October 2000. Unpublished Report, Southern Cross University, Lismore.

Owston, R. D. (1997). The world wide web: A technology to enhance teaching and learning? *Educational Researcher*, 27, (2), 27-33.

Redding, W. C. (1972). *Communication Within the Organization*. New York: Industrial Communication Council.

Stamps, D. (1997). Communities of practice, *Training*, 34, (2), 34-43.

Turnipseed, D. (1988). An integrated, interactive model of organizational climate, culture and effectiveness. *Leadership and Organizations*, 9, (5), 17-21.