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Some Key Success Factors of an Online

Learning Community

Positive Online Experience

For a successful implementation of an online learning community, there should be a carefully crafted learning design plan that conceptualizes the end-user interaction. This approach should capture requirements that relate to the underlying pedagogy, the different types of learning the online community should address and to what extent media resources will be used to enhance the learning environment (Sims, Dobbs and Hand, 2002).   Other key success factors would include how well the actual learning process is facilitated. The premise behind online learning communities is that knowledge is mutually constructed by the members of the community and is facilitated by a knowledge expert. This person's role is to provide guidance in ways that assist learners in constructing a viewpoint in relation to the content introduced.

Every activity the online facilitator invokes must fall in line with the over-arching goal of meeting the needs of the online learner. Conrad and Donaldson (2004) point out that the key to creating a positive learning experience is to identify the student's needs and incorporate activities that address the various learning styles. Another key success factor is learner participation. Instructors face many challenges when facilitating an electronic learning community, such as adapting his or her teaching style, becoming savvy with the technology, and providing timely feedback during the online course session. However, the quality of the course stems from how well the community as a whole constructs knowledge together. Meaningful dialog is vital to this process. The instructor facilitator must be able to identify and transpose the common elements we have grown so accustomed to within a traditional environment, and convert them into meaningful activities to help students succeed online. Part of this process should include

ways to help students overcome dependencies of the classroom environment such as having an ice-breaker session in the form of a game or riddle, provide a place online for students to post learner profiles, and provide a place for threaded discussions of open topics and interests. The point being, shared interests and fun begin to help form a sense of community, where humanity is expressed, and helps online learners to get to know one another. Goals and expectations should be explicitly spelled out and should provide not only an opportunity for questions, but should require all participants to acknowledge that they understand the expectations in order to avoid miscommunication and other problems later on. What has been helpful to many in becoming acculturated within an online community has been having opportunities to express an opinion about something and engage in agreement or disagreement with others.

Getting students to participate in thoughtful ways that avoid trite, lack-of-critical-thought discussions can be managed by setting by defining this prior to the course beginning. This can include (and probably should) an example of what could constitute meaningful dialog and what is not acceptable. This authoritarian approach can be counter balanced by explaining, how this process and experience is a collaboration of knowledge construction whereby everyone is responsible for the quality of each person's contribution. We now become our "brother's keeper" at that point gaining an understanding that actually forces us to take our eyes off of ourselves, embracing a paradigm shift in thinking away just meeting a course requirement as we would in a traditional classroom to one of participatory collaborative learning. Taking advantage of the asynchronous nature of online learning communities is a fundamental way to encourage thoughtful dialog by reason that in a well structured course, students are given

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enough time to prepare. Learners need to understand that a community is only

established when members actively participate. Potential knowledge is lost when learner

participation is lacking and when the contributions are not meaningful. Online learning is

dependent on ever changing web-technologies. Facilitators and learners alike need to

develop rudimentary skills and become savvy users in order to get the most out of the

online learning experience. Within an electronic learning environment, the medium must

be overcome and managed in a way that minimizes the disconnectedness all students are

vulnerable to experience from the lack of physical human contact all have grown

accustomed to in a traditional classroom.

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