Community Building in Virtual Environments: Experiences and Lessons Learnt

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Abstract

There are a growing number of schools who are rapidly turning to virtual classrooms in order to reach students beyond the physical classroom setting. If the virtual class is not designed correctly serious student drop out rates are the result. Building a sense of community in online courses can dramatically reduce these drop out rates. Students who feel connected, even though they are not physically close, persist in distance courses. The feeling of separation has a tendency to reduce the sense of community and gives rise to isolation, distraction and lack of personal attention. A strong feeling of community can increase the flow of information, commitment to goals and cooperation among students resulting in satisfaction with the course and a feeling of obligation to the group.

This paper will focus on the challenge of building community in online courses. This paper will challenge the notion that a sense of strong community can only be sustained in a traditional face-to-face class. Using literature plus experiences and student testimonials this paper will discuss how best to design and conduct an online course so that it can foster a sense of community among not only the students but the faculty as well. Faculty experience and testimonial evidence suggests that a stronger feeling of community can be built in the virtual class environment over that which can exist in a face-to-face traditional classroom. In an online class due to team projects and regular participation in Discussion Forums all students learn to appreciate other virtual classmates. These virtual settings allow introverts and extroverts alike to benefit from these relationships and build strong feelings of community.