



Transformative Practices in an Online Course

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This paper examines the sense of community developed in a Linguistic online course for practicing educators enrolled in an English as Another Language (EAL, ENL or ESL) endorsement graduate program in US. The sense of learning community is applied to the virtual classroom by taking on the issue of how to best design and conduct an online course that fosters community among learners who are physically separated from each other. A learning community is defined as “a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct meaning and confirm mutual understanding” (Garrison, 2007). How the integration of the three elements of a learning community: Teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence foments learner engagement and how the interaction and collaboration among educators increases overtime. This paper presents the educational journey of teaching online, and how this design has changed the educator’s views and experiences of online teaching.

Online learning-for educators and students- is one of the fastest growing phenomena in the educational use of technology. Online learning has roots in the tradition of distance education, which goes back at least 100 years to the early forms of correspondence courses. With the birth of the Internet and the Word Wide Web, the potential for reaching learners around the world increased greatly, thus today’s online learning provides rich educational resources. Moreover, it offers the capability to support both synchronous-real-time-and asynchronous communication between educators and learners. Institutions of higher education have been fast at adopting online learning. Online learning appears to be an effective option for undergraduates and graduates in a wide range of academic studies. Online learning has become popular because of its potential for providing more flexible access to content and instruction at any time, from any place. Frequently, the focus entails 1) increasing the availability of learning experiences for learners who can not or choose not to attend traditional face-to face offerings, 2) assembling and disseminating instructional content more-cost-efficiently, or c) enabling educators to handle more students while maintaining learning outcome quality that is equivalent to the face-to-face instruction. One common conjecture among these offerings is that learning a complex body of knowledge effectively requires a community of learners (Riel and Polin, 2004; Schwen and Hara, 2004; Vrasidas and Glass 2004), and that online technologies can be used to expand and support the communities. Different technology applications are used to support different models of online learning and to support the capacity to nurture social integration across learners. A class of online learning models may use asynchronous communication tools (e.g., email, threaded discussion boards, newsgroups) to allow students to contribute at their convenience. Synchronous technologies (e.g., webcasting, chatrooms, desktop audio/video technology) are used to approximate face-to face teaching strategies such as delivering lectures and holding discussion groups among students. Thus, the type of learning experiences, determines the ways learners acquire knowledge, and or construct meaning through the community connections (Littleton and Whitelock, 2005). The impact of these technologies on the creation of community appears to extent the relative efficacy of the types of instruction in a meaningful way.

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Figure 1.

Types of instruction	Acquisitions of knowledge	Role of the technology
Expository instruction	Digital devices transmit knowledge	Delivers the content
Active learning	Learner builds knowledge through inquiry-based manipulation of digital artifacts such as online simulations, games, etc.	Allows learners to control digital artifacts to explore information or problem
Interactive learning	Learner builds knowledge through inquiry-based collaborative interaction with other learners	Mediates

Creating online community

Sense of community refers to the perception of similarity and strong interdependence with others and the feeling of being a member of a stable group (Sarason, Davidson, & Blatt, 1986).

Sense of community is very relevant for learners, as it has been shown to contribute to the successful completion of an online course (Rovai, 2002). A host of positive outcomes has been attributed to developing collaborative environments that constitute a community. Palloff and Pratt (2005) identify specific pedagogical benefits of online collaborative learning, to include development of critical thinking skills, co-creation of knowledge and meaning, reflection, and transformative learning. Shaw, Duffy, and Stark (2000) suggest that skills gained from the experience of collaborative learning may also be highly transferable to team-based work environments, such as the school or classroom. Educational theorist Parker Palmer asserts that "to learn is to face transformation." (p. 7) As the professor of the course, I soon learned that no different than my first-time online students, I had to make significant preparations to effectively navigate the online environment. To give you a little background on my teaching philosophy, my teaching is organic and I strongly believe in co-developing curriculum. As the professor of the course I know how the goals of my teaching contributes to students' learning. I designed learning experiences that delve into, around, and underneath content. However, I also recognize that students do not come to class as empty vessels, thus I utilize their strengths to built on that knowledge. In summary, I provide them with an opportunity to build curriculum with me something that maybe a new experience for some. Hence, teaching on line has challenged me at many levels. To contextualize my on line teaching let me explain that I teach from my home setting to students at a distance, Blackboard Collaborate is the tool for synchronous distance learning. During class students are able to hear the lectures-see as I teach and listen to their peers interactions-, view notes and other visuals. Every class session is archived and available for students to view on and as needed basis. The Blackboard Collaborate 'classroom' gives me the ability to teach and meet with students live online. The goal is for me, and the students, to feel as if we are part of a single online-community. Developing a community has meant making some specific requirements, for example the posting of pictures or videos along with a short bio before the first day of class, and at least the posting of two comments from peers. Another important requirement is the use of a video camera. Many of the students are returning students-specifically educators, thus their experience with technology is somewhat limited. For example, I required students to have a camera so their presence will be recorded. I have worked hard in integrating lots of scaffolds to support their use of technology. I learned that discussion boards work really well for this but you have to be vigilant about monitoring. This is a great tool, but monitoring adds to the demands of my time, and I need to be cognizant that I must check regularly to keep students engage. Their responses are required to be grounded in the context of the readings and to support their comments with evidence from the readings. The distinction between posting an "I think X" comment and an "I think X because Y, Z, & Q" was a real challenge for the students but I found it is easier for students to write logically than it is for them to speak logically in an in-class discussion. Dividing course information into expert areas for collaborative learning has proven to be effective. Viewing the individuals negotiate understanding of the readings, as well as engaging the rest of the class in critical discussions allowed me to quickly ascertain and target gaps in learning. Fortunately, most students extracted a substantial amount of knowledge for the topic on which they presented and many expressed pride in their newfound expertise. Student presenting on a topic also monitored the discussion board with me and responded to their classmates' posts, which

allowed peer-to-peer teaching to take place. The use of chat room during discussions have aided in the creation of a classroom as a laboratory given the students the opportunity to test and apply their knowledge in simulated applications. Some of the bumps that I have encountered are “wait” time and “e-board.” I define wait time, as the time that I wait for students to contribute. Many of them are not using the tool of “raising their hand” thus I hold the floor while students are negotiating participation. This means that more than one student may want to contribute at once, so I have to organize participation but minutes are lost. e-board has been another challenge. As groups are negotiating understanding and key ideas are developed, they are asked to post their contributions on e-board. However, the ability for any of the participants to erase the written word has proven to be a problem. During two class periods contributions were erased by other students, thus the discussion was abruptly interrupted, and the notes had to be reposted which took time away from class discussion. However, the impetus for my on going reflection is “how can we help teachers realize the power of an online community? I will continue to make this visible by engaging students in the exploration and incorporation of their voices, their knowledge while using this new technology. In conclusion, the new paradigm of trade in educational services will need to be combined effectively with the existing paradigms and strategies in higher education. It should be emphasized that the growing demand for higher education should not compromise the quality of education, and should not compromise opportunities.

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