BEST PRACTICES IN COMMUNITY-BASED ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION
WITH A LEARNERS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Community-based distance education is the combination of distance education and online community. Creating community in distance education courses is not easy. Known best practices in developing and facilitating online community-based distance education are discussed. Also, the author provides a learner perspective based upon her graduate course experience with online community-based distance education.

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INTRODUCTION

Online community-based distance education requires a new pedagogy (Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Today’s online tools provide an opportunity for learner-learner interaction that was not available in the days of paper-based correspondence. To make the most of the online environment, distance education courses should use a community-based approach.

This report describes best practices for designing and facilitating community-based distance education. The information has been collected from a variety of academic sources. In addition it includes a student’s perspective. The author has completed 15 months of an online master’s degree program in a community-based distance education environment.

Defining Online Community-Based Distance Education

The online community-based distance education delivery format is based upon traditional distance education and online communities. To define online community-based distance education, we must first define the components.

Collecting a variety of different definitions of distance education (Jónasson, 2001; Kaplan-Leiserson, n.d.; Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Picciano, A.G., 2001) the following are the five main characteristics:

1. Learner and instructor proximity

Each of the definitions analyzed agreed that in distance education, the learner and instructor where separated by distance or time ( ). Kaplan-Leiserson (n.d.) explicitly states: “Distance education does not preclude the use of the traditional classroom” (C section, ¶ 12). This is in contrast with Picciano’s (2001) definition, which states “The quasi-separation of teacher and learner throughout the period of the learning process” (p. 5). It could be argued that the term “quasi-separation” does not preclude the use of a traditional classroom. Palloff and Pratt (1999) are more specific in their definition, stating that the separation of learner and instructor must occur over the majority of the learning process.

2. Learner-instructor interaction
Learner-instructor interaction is one of the characteristics that differentiate distance education from self-study. Jónasson (2001) defines self-study as “a kind of study where the individual is learning on her/his own without any attention from educational institution or tutor” (Definitions section, ¶ 8). Jónasson (2001) specifies the requirement for two-way communication between learner and instructor in distance education. Palloff and Pratt (1999) are a little more flexible in their definition, specifying the communication between the learner and an educational resource such as the instructor or a tutor.

3. Influence of educational institution

Without some form of educational institution affiliation, the activity fits closer to the definition of self-study then it does of distance education. Picciano (2001) is very specific in his definition requiring “the influence of an educational organization for the planning of courses of study and preparation of materials, and for providing academic and student support services” (p. 5). The definitions provided by Kaplan-Leiserson (n.d.) and Palloff & Pratt (1999) lack this requirement.

4. Use of media

Use of media is the one part of the definition that has changed with the introduction of new technologies (Picciano, 2001). Kaplan-Leiserson’s definition provides the broadest scope in this category including the following options “…written correspondence, text, graphics, audio- and videotape, CD-ROM, online learning, audio- and videoconferencing, interactive TV, and FAX” (C section, ¶ 12). Jónasson (2001), Palloff and Pratt (1999), and Picciano (2001) all state the need for technology as a communication medium, although none are specific by what constitutes technology.

5. Learner-learner interactions

Learner-learner interaction refers to the ability of learners to interact with each other. Picciano (2001) specifically defines a quasi-absence of learner-learner interactions as a characteristic of distance education; however, this characteristic is conspicuously absent from the other definitions. Picciano (2001) does admit that the introduction of new collaborative technologies will require the removal of the quasi-absence stipulation.
Based on the definitions analyzed above, a broad and complete definition of distance education includes the following characteristics:

- Learner and instructor separation by distance or time for the majority of the learning interactions.
- Learner and instructor have some means of asynchronous two-way communication.
- Course has some institutional affiliation or sponsorship.
- Course content delivery by any means including new technologies and traditional paper media.

In addition, no requirement or lack of requirement can be made about learner-learner interactions.

An online community is more than a group of people gathered together online. Although there is no common definition of online community (de Souza and Preece, 2004), various definitions involve the following components (Barab, Kling, Gray, 2004; Riel and Polin, 2004; Palloff and Pratt, 1999):

- Shared beliefs
- Shared history
- Shared knowledge base
- Shared values
- Shared experiences

The definition of a community of practice provides an example of an online community with the purpose of learning. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) define a community of practice as “... a unique combination of three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain” (p. 27).

In the case of an online course, the domain is the course content or subject matter being studied, the community is made up of the learners and the facilitator,
and the practice is the shared activities associated with learning the course content. If the course does not involve learner-learner interactions, or shared activities, then it is not a community-based course.

Adding the characteristics of distance education and online community, an online community-based distance education course should include the following:

- Learner and instructor separation by distance or time for the majority of the learning interactions.
- Learner and instructor have some means of asynchronous two-way communication.
- Course has some institutional affiliation or sponsorship.
- Course content delivery by means of technologies.
- Learner-learner interactions with the intention of sharing beliefs, values and experiences.
- Course contains a mechanism for storing interactions—knowledge and history—throughout the duration of the course.
INITIALLY

This section discusses best practices and learner perspectives associated with the first week or two of a course. The start of any course needs to address two objectives. First, the learners require an orientation to the technology and the learning environment. Second, the learner expectations need to be defined.

Technology and Learning Environment

In the beginning, learners unfamiliar with technology will struggle to connect to and navigate within the learning environment. “In general, students may struggle a bit during the first few weeks of a class as they acclimate to the technology and to learning through the use of technology” (Palloff and Pratt, 2001, p. 119). Learners will need time to explore the learning environment and learn the skills necessary to successfully connect to and participate in the online course. “Some academic institutions have created their own online orientations, which help the student understand not only the software they will be using but online learning itself” (Palloff and Pratt, 2001, p. 84). The main benefit of a separate orientation course is that it decouples learning the environment and technology from the course content. All courses can assume a basic understanding of the environment and technology. This also avoids the need to repeat the orientation in every course.

**Best Practice: Create an orientation course for new online learners.**

When problems occur in the online classroom, learners first approach the course facilitator for assistance. “Regardless of the technology used, the instructor needs to be knowledgeable about it and comfortable enough with it to be able to help with problems” (Palloff and Pratt, 1999, p. 59). If the course facilitator is not knowledgeable enough in the environment to provide learner assistance, then a tutor must be available to the learners.

**Best Practice: Ensure adequate technical support is available for learners.**
Because each course contains unique content and unique activities, learners need time to organize their learning strategies. One strategy the author has found useful is to have read-only access to the course site in advance of the official course start date. This allows learners to familiarize themselves with the course environment, without any pressure to complete course activities. Read-only access prevents keen learners from beginning course discussions pre-maturely. Early postings can cause learners beginning on time to feel behind, and therefore, early access should be limited to read-only access. Salmon (2003) supports this recommendation with the following advice. “Provide time for participants to become familiar with the conferences in the programme, preferably in advance” (p. 162).

**Learner Perspective: Permit read-only access to the course in advance of the course start.**

**Learner Expectations**

In order to support a learning community, learners need some form of agreement of expectations. “Guidelines and procedures should be loose and free-flowing, and generated predominantly by the participants. Imposed guidelines that are too rigid will constrain discussions, causing participants to worry about the nature of their posts rather than to simply post” (Palloff and Pratt, 1999, p. 18). A successful way of gaining learner agreement is to have a discussion where learners express and negotiate behavioural expectations of themselves and their peers.

**Best Practice: Allow learners to participate in defining community participation guidelines.**
COLLABORATION AND TEAMWORK

This section discusses best practices and learner perspectives associated with collaboration and teamwork. The section is divided into three sub-sections: community building framework, team structure, and collaborative activities.

Community Building Framework

A community building framework describes the process for developing community. The early activities within a course should promote the introduction of a learning community. As the course progresses, activities should become more in-depth and require a greater depth in content. Gilly Salmon (2002) uses the term ‘scaffolding’ “… gradually building on participants’ previous experiences. A structured learning scaffold offers essential support and development to participants at each stage as they build up expertise in learning online” (p. 10).

Gilly Salmon (2002) provides a five stage model which “… provides an example of how participants can benefit from increasing skill and comfort in working, networking, and learning online, and what e-moderators need to do at each stage to help them to achieve this success. The model shows how to motivated online participants to build learning through appropriate e-tivities and to pace e-learners through programmes of training and development.” (p. 10). Salmon’s (2003) model consists of the following stages:

1. Access and motivation

“The purpose at this stage is to expose participants to the platform (not train them), and to enable them to become successful in using technology and see the benefits” (p. 30).

2. Online socialization

“Stage two involves individual participants establishing their online identities and then finding others with whom to interact” (p. 29).

3. Information exchange
“At stage three, participants give information relevant to the course to each other. Up to and including stage three, a form of co-operation occurs, i.e. support for each person’s goals” (p. 29).

4. Knowledge construction

“At stage four, course-related group discussions occur and the interaction becomes more collaborative. The communication depends on the establishment of common understands” (p. 29).

5. Development

“At stage five, participants look for more benefits form the system to help them achieve personal goals, explore how to integrate online into other forms of learning and reflect on the learning processes” (p. 29).

Best Practice: Use a community building framework.

Team Structure

Many variables including course structure and facilitator skills affect the ideal class size. For example, Salmon (2003) states: “... we’d say that the optimum number is rather dependent on different variables such as cost, type of activity, and so on but that we agree with 10 as an optimum in ideal circumstance” (p. 60). However, Palloff and Pratt (1999) state: “As many as twenty or more participants can have a successful experience in an asynchronous setting. However, the success of a large group depends on the skill of the instructor as facilitator, his or her knowledge of the electronic medium, the content being discussed and explored, and the means by which that exploration occurs” (p. 55).

Best Practice: Limit 10 – 20 learners per course session.

The author’s experience is with community based courses with 30-40 learners. As a result of the large number of learners, class-wide discussions were time consuming and overwhelmed many of the learners. The most successful
strategy to deal with this was to divide the class into two groups. Each learner is allowed to read the discussion of the other group, but are only required to participate in the discussions of the group they are assigned. This method effectively creates two parallel discussions; each with a manageable number of participants. Allowing the groups to read each others postings increases the number of perspectives for those students wishing the additional information.

**Learner Perspective:** If there are more than 20 learners, divide the class into 2 groups.

**Collaborative Activities**

“Including collaborative assignments in an online course helps facilitate the development of a learning community and enable achievement of the goal of generating new knowledge and deeper levels of meaning” (Palloff and Pratt, 2001, p. 115). A collaborative assignment should be assigned early in the course. This assists teams in bonding, and helps promote community.

**Learner Perspective:** Create a collaborative assignment early in the course to assist team bonding.
COURSE DESIGN

One component of the online course is the course schedule. It is used by learners to schedule their time throughout the course. Often as a course progresses, events occur that require the course schedule to change. If the course schedule does change, learners need an official source of information on the changes. Keeping the course schedule up-to-date reflecting changes helps learners organize their learning time.

Learner Perspective: Keep the course schedule up-to-date.

Activity Design

Activities, discussions or e-tivities are the main method for learner-learner interactions within the online course. Typically, activities are designed to encourage discussions that promote a social learning context.

Learner-learner interactions are what create the “community” in distance education. "When we ask students to evaluate the effectiveness of their online learning experience, it is the ability to engage in asynchronous discussion with their peers that they most value." (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 10).

The learner-learner interactions will not occur automatically in an online course, they must be built into the course structure. In order to encourage community building, the creation of online community should be a defined learning objective.

Best Practice: Build learner-learner interactions into course activities.

Each activity should begin with an invitational message that specifies the objective and outlines the required task for the learners. Providing learners with the activity objective helps them focus their participation to ensure the appropriate learning objective is met. “You will find that participants often want to discuss the purpose of an e-tivity between themselves” (Salmon, 2002, p. 89).
Aim to provide just one invitational message, which contains everything needed to take part. *Each invitational message e-tivity should include:*

- The purpose of the e-tivity (why the participants are doing it). If the e-tivity are being assessed, indicated what might indicate success and how participants can achieve it.
- What participants should do and how they can go about doing it.
- How long it should or could take. An idea of what the e-tivity starts and when it should finish.
- How the participants should work together.

(Salmon, 2002, p. 89)

**Best Practice: Provide objectives for each activity.**

Learners need a reason to put effort into an activity. “Build in motivation as part of the process of undertaking the e-tivity itself and not as something separate from it. Motivation occurs because of the learning activities. Avoid trying to motivate people simply to log on and ‘discuss’. Instead, provide an e-tivity that makes taking part worthwhile” (Salmon, 2002, p. 88). Without motivation learners are likely to lose interest in the activity; thereby, creating an activity that loses community building momentum.

**Best Practice: Build motivation into activities.**

The course designer needs to balance providing too much information with providing too little information. For example, Salmon (2002) suggests that you provide an outline for how participants should work together. I disagree with this. One of the biggest learner rewards for online teamwork occurs when the team is able to solve the problem with little guidance. Providing too much of a framework for teams weakens the accomplishment and reduces the opportunity for creativity.

Depending on the level of the learners, you need to be careful not to proscribe too much in your activities. If they are too proscribed, each learner will
post with the same information. This does not create an active discussion. It is the different viewpoints that each learner brings to the table that creates active discussions.

**Learner Perspective: Do not over prescribe course activities.**

“Be highly sensitive to timing and pacing. Divide the e-tivity up into bite-sized chunks of no more than two or three weeks’ work for a complete e-tivity – less if possible” (Salmon, 2002, p. 88). In my experience, the best length of time for a discussion is seven to ten days. After that time, discussions tend to lag, and learners are ready to move onto the next task. If you leave it too long, learners will reduce their frequency of logging into the course; which will cause the community to fade.

**Best Practice: Be sensitive to timing and pacing.**
FACILITATION

The role of the facilitator in an online community-based course is different from the role of a classroom teacher. The community-based online course is more learner centric than the typical classroom.

It becomes clear that a more active learning model is the model of choice for the online distance learning environment. Given the limitations of access to the student population, as well as such elements as time and distance, the instructor cannot be in control of how or what is being learned. And because they are left to some degree to their own devices, it is up to the learners to make sense of the body of knowledge associated with the course being delivered. (Palloff and Pratt, 1999, p.16)

As a result of the more active learning model, the role of the course facilitator is that of a discussion moderator rather than a teacher. "The e-moderator’s main role is to engage the participants so that the knowledge they construct is usable in new and different situations. So you can see the goal of the e-moderator for this kind of learning is to enable ‘meaning making’ rather than content transmission” (Salmon, 2003, p. 52).

To be successful at creating a community learning environment, the facilitator must relinquish control. "Another important consideration is the instructor's willingness to give up some control in the teaching and learning process in order to empower the learners and build a learning community" (Palloff and Pratt, 2001, p. 22).

Best Practice: Relinquish control

Facilitator availability affects community development: "Several studies demonstrate the power of instructor immediacy on creating a greater sense of classroom community among learners ... Responding to email or threaded discussion in a timely manner is one way to be immediate. As a rule of thumb, we suggest responding within 24 hours ... Students eventually develop an expectation of presence based on an instructor's response rate. Responding at different times of
the day may even build anticipation for immediacy." (Woods & Ebersole, 2003, Communal Scaffold section, ¶ 9-10).

If facilitators do not actively participate in discussions, learners may feel lost. “... We have found that students voice anxiety if the instructor is not obviously present. Regardless of the ‘student centeredness’ of this mode of education, students still seek guidance and approval from the instructor as they move through the course. If that guidance is not forthcoming, they begin to worry that they may be headed in the wrong direction” (Palloff and Pratt, 2001, p. 121).

If there discussions are moving along well, the facilitators may feel there is no need for their participation. This is not the case. Facilitators should make comments to discussion groups at least twice a week to reassure learners (Palloff and Pratt, 2001).

**Best Practice: Login daily and post to discussion groups at least twice per week.**

“The good distance pedagogue must, above all, be available. The relative freedom in time, which is one of the biggest advantages of distance learning, does not apply in the same way to the distance teacher/leader” (Svensson, 2001, p. 32).

It is not always possible for one instructor to be available enough to provide learners with an adequate level of immediacy. Immediacy can be achieved by either have teaching teams, such as two facilitators or a facilitator and a tutor.

In order to cover the whole working week, and to take into consideration other exacting tasks, illness and absence for various reasons, it is almost necessary to have a system to complete and substitute the ordinary course leader. The obvious solution is teacher teams—small and coordinated groups that take turns to look after the course conferences, possibly be on duty during weekends, cover each others’ absences and complete each others’ subject areas. (Svensson, 2001, p. 34)

**Best Practice: Consider teaching teams to help support facilitator immediacy.**

Online facilitators should be available to learners over a variety of mediums. Some learners will be comfortable with asynchronous email contact; however, other
learners may need an opportunity to communicate using a synchronous medium. For synchronous mediums, facilitators should attempt to provide “office hours” using the same medium that the learners use for synchronous communication. For example, if learners communicate using Instant Messaging, then facilitators should provide office hours where they are available to be contacted via Instant Messaging. Using the same medium provides a level of comfort for the learners.

**Learner Perspective: Support communication mediums familiar to learners.**

One of the greatest frustrations learners face is when they are having a problem with an assignment and can not reach a facilitator. If the facilitator is not available on weekends, do not make assignment due on Sundays. Ensure that assignment due days coincide with facilitator availability. Generally, the best time for assignments to be due is mid-week.

**Learner Perspective: Do not make assignments due when facilitators are not available.**

At the end of an activity, the facilitator needs to officially “end” the activity in order to encourage learners to move onto the next activity. “When a conference or online activity naturally starts to wane, it is best to close it and start something fresh.” (Salmon, 2003, p. 60). In the closing message, the facilitator should summarize the key points discussed in the activity and provide additional closing remarks (Salmon, 2003).

**Best Practice: Create activity summaries.**
ENVIRONMENT

In traditional higher education campuses, learners are able to go to the coffee shop or pub to discuss their feelings about their courses. Creating space (a discussion group), that the instructor does not access, allows learners the opportunity to vent frustrations. Sharing frustrations and experiences promotes a deeper sense of community. “Such private places—apart from the instructor's watchful eye—allow more opportunities for ‘hyperpersonal communication’ (Walther, 1997). The Hyperpersonal Communication perspective recognizes ‘unique affordances of the medium that allow users to achieve more favorable impressions and greater levels of intimacy than those in parallel FtF activities’ (p. 348)” (Woods & Ebersole, 2003, Communal Scaffold section, ¶ 23). However, excluding the facilitators from the social space does not promote community. Learners have other mechanisms to vent frustrations, such as email and instant messaging. The course site should make community building practices a priority.

**Best Practice: Include the facilitators in social spaces.**

Using labels like coffee shop or pub for an informal social discussion groups helps give learners context. Learners have a better idea of the types of discussions that are encouraged in this social area when they are given labels with which they can relate.

**Learner Perspective: Create a coffee shop.**
CONCLUSION

“Key to the learning process are the interactions among students themselves, the interactions between facility and students, and the collaboration in learning that results from these interactions. In other words, the formation of a learning community through which knowledge is imparted and meaning is co-created sets the stage for successful learning outcomes” (Palloff and Pratt, 1999, p.5).

The creation of an online learning community as a part of a course is not an easy task. It requires careful planning by the course authors to ensure a course design that promotes community. Once the course is appropriately designed, the course facilitators must support the formation of a learning community. The best practices and learner perspectives provided in this report help to develop and nurture the learning community.
REFERENCES

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LIST OF BEST PRACTICES

Initially
✓ Create an orientation course for new online learners.
✓ Ensure adequate technical support is available for learners.
✓ Allow learners to participate in defining community participation guidelines.

Collaboration and teamwork
✓ Use a community building framework.
✓ Limit 10 – 20 learners per course session.

Course design
✓ Provide objectives for each activity.
✓ Build motivation into activities.
✓ Build learner-learner interactions into course activities.
✓ Be sensitive to timing and pacing.

Facilitation
✓ Login daily and post to discussion groups at least twice per week.
✓ Consider teaching teams to help support facilitator immediacy.
✓ Relinquish control.
✓ Create activity summaries.
LIST OF LEARNER PERSPECTIVES

Initially
✓ Permit read-only access to the course in advance of the course start date.

Collaboration and teamwork
✓ If there are more than 20 learners, divide the class into 2 groups.
✓ Create a collaborative assignment early in the course to assist team bonding.

Course design
✓ Keep the course schedule up-to-date.
✓ Do not over prescribe course activities.

Facilitation
✓ Support communication mediums familiar to learners.
✓ Do not make assignments due when facilitators are not available.

Environment
✓ Include the facilitators in social spaces.
✓ Create a coffee shop.