

Welcoming Design – Hosting a Hospitable Online Course

Richard S. Ascough

Queen's Theological College

Abstract. *A discussion about how instructors can host a hospitable online learning environment can address one of the fundamental philosophical and theological concerns frequently expressed about online learning – the loss of face-to-face interaction and, with it, the loss of community building (cf. Delamarter 2005, 138). This perceived link between physical presence and community creation, sometimes articulated, frequently assumed, often stands in the way of instructors, administrators, and even institutions fully embracing online learning. This article will argue that when one gives due attention to hospitality, the potential for building online community is greatly enhanced, and with it comes a more effective pedagogical strategy for deep learning. It will conclude with some general recommendations for employing hospitality for building online learning communities.*

Introduction

Community is “the essence of distance learning” claim Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt (1999, 163), yet it is the sense of community that remains elusive for many online educators. One continues to hear grudging acceptance of distance education as a means of course delivery with the caveat that runs something like – “but, of course, online learning cannot replicate the community building that goes on in the classroom.” Granted that too often this is true, I would suggest that this is due not to the nature of the learning medium (technology) but to the design principles behind the learning. The seemingly impersonal nature of technology requires that we give deliberate attention to that which we often assume (rightly or wrongly) about face-to-face teaching – a personal, welcoming, hospitable environment that encourages learning among participants. Such attention cannot help but support and encourage knowledge acquisition (Palloff and Pratt 1999, 163). Without the purposeful formation of an online learning community we are not likely to engage in effective teaching and learning.

The question remains, however, how one can create community online. Too often the literature affirms the need for community but remains vague on how it might

be accomplished in practical terms. It is here that we find helpful the sense of hospitality that is so integral to the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning, and that was embodied by Lucinda Huffaker in her years with the Center as associate director and then director. What became clear to many of us who worked beside, and looked up to, Lucinda is her commitment to the centrality of hospitality in the learning experiences of participants in the Wabash Center programs. We have learned that the central function of hospitality in these programs is transferable to other learning situations. Hospitality is not a nice “add-on” to the core learning experiences of students – something extra that is pleasant to have but superfluous to deep learning. Rather, hospitality is central to effective constructivist student learning both on- and offline.

Social Presence in Online Learning Communities

On the basis of their experience as online educators and consultants, Palloff and Pratt argue that there are six elements critical to successful distance learning: honesty, responsiveness, relevance, respect, openness, and empowerment. It is striking that not one of these is a technological issue (1999, 160). All of them are (inter)personal issues, as are the four dimensions of online learning noted by Rovai (2002) – spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of learning expectations – and the emotional sets noted by Lehman (2006): anxiety-confidence, boredom-fascination, frustration-euphoria, dispirited-encouraged, terror-enchancement. These illustrate what is becoming clear in study after study – the essence of distance learning is community (Palloff and Pratt 1999, 163–164).

In the business sector, increasing attention is given to “communities of practice,” defined as a group of people “who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 4; Wenger 1998). In the business world these communities of practice connect people within and across different organizations in a network of shared knowledge and expertise. They are

most successful when “the goals and needs of an organization intersect with the passions and aspirations of the participants” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 32).

Communities of practice have subsequently been linked to the online learning environment, in part because in the business sector they can and do form in cyberspace. John Smith and Beverly Trayner (2006) make this link in framing the outcomes of online courses they designed. Their model connects people and practice with the subject matter – “stimulation of relationships between participants (*community*), exploration of a body of knowledge in which participants share an interest (*domain*), and development of practices that support further learning (*practice*).” They point out that the communities of practice model grounds the construction of social relationships in “self-organizing, productive ways.” This learning model supports deeper learning insofar as the emphasis lies not on the acquisition of “knowledge fragments” but in “the quality and depth of conversations, dialogue, and the negotiation of meaning” and the development of relationships that support learning (Smith and Trayner 2006).

The communities of practice model relies on “collaborative forms of learning, sharing, inquiry, and group participation” in a decentralized environment (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, and Dunlap 2004). As such, it reflects bounded learning communities – “groups that form within a structured teaching or training setting, typically a course” (2004). These bounded learning communities are different from the more spontaneous communities of practice in that they are developed “in direct response to guidance provided by an instructor, supported by a cumulative resource base” (2004). Unlike communities of practice, bounded learning communities are formed within the framework of a course with a particular focus and subject matter, and participants, although freely choosing to enroll, are often constrained to do so by outside forces. As subject-focused groups they are more “communities of inquiry” than communities of practice.

The forging of a community of inquiry “takes leadership, support, and facilitation” (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, and Dunlap 2004). The role of the instructor is crucial, and efforts to build community must be deliberate (Palloff and Pratt 1999, 163). The instructor needs to become aware of the necessity to design a course that uses technological supports to enhance online community-building (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, and Dunlap 2004). The fostering of online community, as with the fostering of in-class community, needs to be a deliberately designed component of the learning environment. Due attention to design is a crucial component of a welcoming learning environment – such things do not just happen.

In designing an online community of inquiry, one must be cognizant of three major components that “overlap to form the educational experience of the learner”: social

presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Perry and Edwards 2005). Cognitive presence reflects the abilities of learners to construct meaning through interaction, while teaching presence is the design and facilitation of the learning sequences (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer 2001). These two presences receive much attention in the literature, and rightly so. However, there is a growing awareness of the need to pay attention to social presence in the learning environment. “Social presence is defined as the degree of awareness of another person in an interaction and the consequent appreciation of an interpersonal relationship” (Savery 2005). It is the sense of being interconnected with other learners despite the physical separation in the online environment. The absence of this sense of social presence can lead not only to high levels of frustration and stress but can lower the effectiveness of the learning (Savery 2005; cf. Lawless and Allan 2004).

In identifying “social presence,” Xu (2005) uses the analogy of a social situation such as a party in which a newcomer will feel anxious in not knowing anyone. As the newcomer begins socially interacting with people, he or she begins to feel comfortable and happy in the new environment. Should this person not interact, she or he will feel isolated and ostracized and will be unlikely to return to a party if invited again. Thus, “social presence” is “the degree to which an individual feels access to other people” (Xu 2005). Often such connections are made through non-verbal cues – a smile, a handshake, a wink, the offer of a drink or food. In the online environment these non-verbal cues are missing. Instead, social presence is experienced through a sense of not being alone, established for the online participant through the awareness of the existence of others with whom he or she can communicate (Xu 2005).

The concept of social presence is an essential component in building an online community of learning. The key is for the instructor, the host of the online “party,” to create the atmosphere of social presence in which learners experience one another as co-communicators and forge a sense of community with one another. When students move beyond the technology and, although physically separated, “‘perceive’ and ‘feel’ that they are ‘co-present’ in the same room” (Lehman 2006) “a warm, cooperative, and approachable learning environment” is created, which provides “motivation and support for learners” (Xu 2005).

Hosting Online Learning Communities

In this section I will offer some practical suggestions as to how community can be promoted within the online environment through the hospitality of the instructor (see also Palloff and Pratt 1999, 110–128; and Chickering and Ehrmann 1996). At the outset it is important to note that, at the very least, one needs to create a humanizing learn-

ing environment – one in which learners are affirmed in their learning (Perry and Edwards 2005). The instructor has a responsibility to create a social environment that supports and nurtures learning within an atmosphere of trust and reciprocal concern. In doing so, the instructor cannot remain behind the curtain of technology, creating and manipulating the learning in a Wizard of Oz-like fashion. Rather, “instructor visibility is absolutely critical” (Savery 2005).

Welcome Learners

From the outset, an online learning environment should include a welcome area in which announcements can be posted and from which learners can navigate the course site. The high attrition rate among online learners is often attributed to the lack of ease of navigation within a course website, particularly among those who are new to the online learning environment. Thus, ease of use and visual appeal are basic to designing an online learning environment (Palloff and Pratt 1999, 64–65). Numerous supporting documents and networks need to be in place to help student navigation. Granted that not all learners will find online learning an effective way to learn, the transition into the course can be eased simply by providing clear and direct guidance about how to begin.

Break the Ice

One important way of initiating social presence early in an online course is through the use of an icebreaker or “getting to know you” game. While the usual academic round-robin is to have students state their name, degree, year of study, and reason for taking the course, a much more vibrant and personal approach is not only appropriate but necessary to set the tone for the collaborative online learning environment. Youth group or party games can easily be adapted to the online environment: for example, “two truths and a lie” or the sharing of a hobby or talent of which a person is most proud. Another means of addressing the students’ sense of online presence is to have the students undertake a learning styles inventory or an inventory of characteristics of successful online learners (such instruments are widely available online). Having done so, the sharing and comparing of results with other students and the instructor will demonstrate the diversity of strengths, weaknesses, hopes, fears, and approaches that comprise the class (it might be worthwhile doing the initial self-disclosure in an anonymous forum so no one feels that they are being put on the spot). It can be encouraging and empowering for learners to know that they are not alone in their fears and doubts about online learning.

Promote Conversations

A good host acts to connect people with mutual interests or common friends. One might include in the course

website a social discussion area “where group members can interact on a personal level, apart from course material” (Palloff and Pratt 1999, 102). Here, learners can be encouraged to begin their own discussions on topics of their own choosing into which others might like to jump. As one student said of the “Corner Café” discussion area of a recent web-based course, “This was important as we developed our sense of community. It allowed for relaxed exchange, learning about others, humor, and neat ideas.”

In the online environment the instructor can note where learners are articulating similar interests or themes, sometimes in different discussion groups, and bring those two or three (or more) participants together to carry on the conversation in private email exchanges. The challenge is that such conversations often stand outside the purview of regular course design and certainly run against the grain of face-to-face class participation in which side conversations among students are a distraction. Yet, it is precisely these types of conversations that the online environment can promote and encourage, and it is important that students learn that they are acceptable. As one student noted, private email within an online course website “allowed for the furthering of individual student friendships (as long as you emphasize that it is private from everyone – including the Prof!.)” The online learning environment works most effectively for constructive learning when students are not simply focused on time-on-task – that is, accomplishing the assigned duty. As host, one can demonstrate and promote the notion that the online environment can be a rich place of multi-focal opportunities for engaging subjects and colleagues – more akin to a party than a conference paper.

Encourage Participation

Once the online learning community has been initiated, the hospitable instructor will encourage participation through the use of a variety of interesting and stimulating activities (Berge 2006). Early in the course it can be important to facilitate the formulation of shared goals among the participants. A conscientious host ensures that guests are well informed about the particulars of their party; for example, suggested dress code, special theme, gift-giving, etc. It is similar in the online environment, where the hosting instructor can establish some initial goals for the learning, but then allow learners to mold, manipulate, and ultimately formulate what will be the course goals.

Such an activity can lead naturally into the negotiation of shared expectations within the course. As host, the instructor can do some of the initial setting of course expectations, both in terms of assessment of student learning and online behavioral norms. Students will, however, feel more engaged in the course if they also contribute to the expectations of how learning will be approached. Inviting student input is akin to a host announcing that a party will have a particular theme but

allowing the guests to determine how they will participate in that theme, both before and during the party itself. Student engagement is not only enhanced through the negotiation of goals and expectations, it is also the way students will quickly come to experience the social presence of their fellow learners.

At the heart of building an online learning community is direct participation in collaborative learning. Activities such as small group discussions, dyadic partnerships, or debate on controversial topics are all means whereby learners are invited to engage one another in the learning process (see further Ascough 2002). It is through these shared activities that social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence coalesce and deep learning takes place (cf. Weigel 2001, 5–6).

Make Connections

It is becoming increasingly clear that deep learning is best attained through the connections students can make between their academic subjects and their own life situations (cf. King and Baxter Magolda 1996). Instructors can “create realistic problem-based experiences to make content more personally meaningful for learners” (Hootstein 2002). Drawing again upon the analogy of a party, there are many reasons to attend such an event – entertainment, companionship, meeting new people, fulfilling a job requirement, making political connections, seeing and being seen, and negotiating business contracts, to name just a few. In any given gathering all kinds of motives are likely to be present.

Likewise, students enroll in online courses for a variety of reasons. It is the role of the instructor-host to discover these reasons and ensure that the form and content of the course connect with the student motivations. Students need to be able to connect their learning with their own situation(s) – why they are learning these things. Facilitating this is no easy task and again draws upon the resources of the instructor, as host, to provide opportunities for students to engage material around their hopes and desires for the course. At the same time, the instructor-host can demonstrate that there are other reasons why a particular course is worthwhile and practical. For example, students may know that they need to formulate their own Christology prior to appearing before their denomination’s credentialing board. An instructor might also need to demonstrate that the understanding of the Christology of others throughout history will not only help them in this task, but will also provide them with resources to understand the various positions that are present in the churches of today and the options that they will engage as they progress in their ministry.

Provide Feedback

One of the primary stresses for online learners is the lack of clear and prompt feedback to the ideas that they are

posting online (Palloff and Pratt 2003, 129). It is akin to the silence in a room that follows a dinner-party comment – it is socially awkward and distressing for the one who made the comment. The gracious host will step in to address the silence and casually, yet carefully, move the conversation forward. In the online environment, the instructor needs not only to provide direct feedback to the student on assignments but needs also to ensure a means whereby feedback is regularly given to discussion postings. One way to do this is to provide at the end of each unit a letter grade with comments on the assessment of the student’s participation around some clearly demarcated indicators (e.g., relevance, timing, applicability). Other possibilities lie within the technology itself, such as the creation of a brief video clip of the host-instructor addressing the strengths and weaknesses of the student’s performance (cf. Chickering and Ehrmann 1996). Student-to-student feedback can be built into the design by ensuring that each learner is a respondent to another (cf. Palloff and Pratt 2001, 115) – an exercise not unlike a set seating arrangement at a dinner party that is designed for compatibility and engaging conversation. There are some units where a grouping of students of like mind will function well. In other units, students who hold contrary views will be a more effective grouping. Strong students should not always be called upon to help and guide weaker students. Varying the groups works well. As a student noted in a recent course, “A mixture is good – collaborative learning requires vitality and enthusiasm, not always helper and helped.”

Avoid Authoritarianism

There is a fine line between acting as the instructor of a course and being a “fellow learner.” No matter how much we strive to be the latter, the reality often remains that, as instructors, we stand in a power relationship over the students in that we are making judgments about their work and assigning grades. This does not, however, have to be autocratic (Berge 2006). The initial negotiation of course and assignment expectations with students allows for students to provide feedback on their own participation and production and that of their colleagues. As host of the online learning experience, the instructor must ensure that such evaluations remain true to the articulated expectations and do not become personal in a way that transgresses the boundaries of the learning environment. Again drawing upon the analogy of a party, the host is the one most often attuned to conversations that are getting out of hand and are perhaps devolving into arguments or insults. And it is the host’s responsibility, for the sake of the guests and for the sake of the party, to step in and defuse the situation. So it is with online learning. Constant monitoring of conversations, whether or not for the purpose of evaluation, will ensure that the instructor can step in when necessary to resolve situations that might get

out of hand. In some cases it might require an online comment or two; in other cases an offline conversation (by email or by phone) may be required to address the situation. The point here is that it is the responsibility of the instructor – the host – to ensure that such things are addressed immediately and effectively.

Respect Privacy

Respect for privacy is crucial, particularly with information shared with an instructor that may not be meant for public disclosure. Before naming a student's family crisis, death of a family member, or illness, it is important to check with the student to ensure disclosure is acceptable (Savery 2005). One does not announce at a party that a particular guest is leaving early because of their gastrointestinal problems! Neither would one announce the early departure or non-participation of a student for such personal reasons. Doing so not only embarrasses the student, it also breaks down the level of trust in the online community itself. Remaining students are not likely to be as open about themselves and their learning if private details about their fellow-learners are conveyed to the class. The importance of this principle is true also for the participants themselves, and such rules should be negotiated early, and clearly, in the course.

Conclusion

My primary emphasis in this article has been the building of a hospitable learning environment in the initiation and participation phases of course delivery. However, there is one final aspect of the course that warrants attention from the instructor-host – the closure. The overall learning experience will be affected by how a course is drawn to its conclusion. Like any good host, the instructor should ensure that adequate opportunity is given for leave-taking. Students will react well to an opportunity to post personal goodbyes or say thank you to one another. This cannot be mandated, yet the instructor can provide the space and the suggestion for facilitating such things. What can be mandated is course-related leave-taking activities, such as asking students to reflect on what they have learned in light of their initial goals and expectations for the course.

There may be some learners who have found such a deep connection with others that they want the course to continue past the closure date. It is important to communicate that the party, so to speak, is in fact over. A good host will guide such people towards the door through gentle encouragement, eventually closing the door on any continuation of the party. In the online learning environment it is important to state for how long the course content area will be available online after the course termination and at what point it will “disappear” (i.e.,

student access to material will be blocked). A hospitable instructor knows when the time has come to draw things to a close.

Here I return to that with which I began – the example of Lucinda Huffaker as host and mentor at the Wabash Center. Many of us share a sense of sadness at Lucinda's departure. Yet, she herself knows best when it is time to move to new challenges. It is comforting to know that Lucinda's legacy of hospitality will endure, not only at the Wabash Center but also in the teaching, both face-to-face and online, of those who have experienced her own gracious hospitality. And, as I have attempted to demonstrate with reference to online learning, hospitality is not peripheral to the teaching and learning endeavor – it is central to the creation of an environment that fosters effective student learning.

References

- Ascough, Richard S. 2002. “Designing for Online Distance Education: Putting Pedagogy Before Technology.” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 5: 17–29.
- Berge, Zane L. 2006. “The Role of the Online Instructor/Facilitator.” http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/teach_online.html (accessed February 9, 2007).
- Chickering, Arthur W. and Ehrmann, Stephen C. 1996. “Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever.” *AAHE Bulletin* (October): 3–6. <http://www.tltgroup.org/programs/seven.html> (accessed February 9, 2007).
- Delamarter, Steve. 2005. “Theological Educators and their Concerns about Technology.” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 8: 131–143.
- Hootstein, Ed. 2002. “Wearing Four Pairs of Shoes: The Roles of E-Learning Facilitators.” <http://www.learningcircuits.org/2002/oct2002/elearn.html> (accessed February 5, 2007).
- King, Patricia M. and Baxter Magolda, Marcia B. 1996. “A Developmental Perspective on Learning.” *Journal of College Student Development* 37: 163–173.
- Lawless, Naomi and Allan, John. 2004. “Understanding and Reducing Stress in Collaborative e-Learning.” *Electronic Journal on e-Learning* 2/1: 121–128. <http://www.ejel.org/volume-2/vol2-issue1/issue1-art15-lawless-allen.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2007).
- Lehman, Rosemary M. 2006. “The Role of Emotion in Creating Instructor and Learner Presence in the Distance Education Experience.” *Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning* 2/2. <http://www.jcal.emory.edu/viewarticle.php?id=45&layout=html> (accessed February 10, 2007).
- Paloff, Rena M. and Pratt, Keith. 1999. *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- . 2001. *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- . 2003. *The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Working with Online Learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Perry, Beth and Edwards, Margaret. 2005. “Exemplary Online Educators: Creating a Community of Inquiry.” *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 6/2. <http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/tojde18/articles/article6.htm> (accessed February 9, 2007).

- Rourke, Liam; Anderson, Terry; Garrison, D. Randy; and Archer, Walter. 2001. "Assessing Social Presence In Asynchronous Text-based Computer Conferencing." *Journal of Distance Education / Revue de l'enseignement à distance* 14/2. http://cade.icaap.org/vol14.2/rourke_et_al.html (accessed February 10, 2007).
- Rovai, Alfred P. 2002. "Building Sense of Community at a Distance." *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 3/1. <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/viewArticle/79/152> (accessed February 10, 2007).
- Savery, John R. 2005. "BE VOCAL: Characteristics of Successful Online Instructors." *Journal of Interactive Online Learning* 4/2: 141–152. <http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/viewarticle.cfm?volid=4&IssueID=15&ArticleID=73> (accessed February 10, 2007).
- Smith, John D. and Trayner, Beverly. 2006. "Online Course Design from a Communities-of-Practice Perspective." *eLearn Magazine* (Sept. 22). http://www.elearnmag.org/subpage.cfm?section=best_practices&article=34-1 (accessed February 5, 2007).
- Weigel, Van B. 2001. *Deep Learning for a Digital Age: Technology's Untapped Potential to Enrich Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wenger, Etienne. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, Eitenne; McDermott, Richard; and Snyder, William M. 2002. *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Wilson, Brent G.; Ludwig-Hardman, Stacey; Thornam, Christine L.; and Dunlap, Joanna C. 2004. "Bounded Community: Designing and Facilitating Learning Communities in Formal Courses." *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 5/3. <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/204/286> (accessed February 9, 2007).
- Xu, Yu. 2005. "Creating Social Presence Online." In *Encyclopedia of Educational Technology*, ed. B. Hoffman. <http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/articles/creatsp/start.htm> (accessed February 9, 2007).