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In this chapter, the authors will expand upon the definition of learning communities, discussing the ways in which this concept has changed and adapted through the incorporation/infusion of web-based technologies. In addition, strategies on how to create and use online learning communities both with students and for professional practice will be shared.

Utilizing Online Learning Communities in Student Affairs

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Online learning has improved access and availability to higher education for both traditional and nontraditional students. Today's traditional student shares many of the characteristics formerly associated with older, nontraditional learners: full-time employment, spouses and children, and elderly care or responsibilities (Roby, Ashe, Singh, & Clark, 2013). In order to reach this population, almost 90% of all higher education institutions today offer online courses. As a result, nearly half of all students who have graduated in the last 10 years have enrolled in at least one online course (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011). Even when overall enrollment numbers decline, as they have in recent years, online enrollments continue to rise. To illustrate the point, the overall enrollment growth rate in the fall academic terms of 2008, 2009, and 2010 was 4.7%, 2.2%, and 0.6%, respectively. During that same period, the enrollment growth rate of online students was 16.9%, 21.1%, and 10.1%, respectively (Britto & Rush, 2013).

Learning communities have and continue to be viewed as a successful intervention tool to aid students in their transition to college life (Renn & Reason, 2013). Considering the rise in online student enrollment and the changing demands faced by traditional students, as well as job market expectations for technological literacy, it is imperative that we utilize technology-enhanced learning communities to support student success. As we progress through the second decade of the 21st century, the field of student affairs has the opportunity to recognize and embrace the potential of technology to expand on the proven success of the learning community structure. In fact, the benefits of learning communities are present regardless of the delivery format, be it face-to-face, blended, or fully online (Lenning, Hill, Saunders, Solan, & Stokes, 2013).

While the merits of learning communities within student affairs have been discussed throughout this volume, the incorporation of technology into higher education today leads us to ask—how do we effectively utilize web-based technologies to bring learning communities into the digital age? In this chapter, we will delve into the concept of online learning communities (OLCs), theories behind OLCs, and ways in which student affairs professionals can best use these structures to serve students today.

Defining and Describing Online Learning Communities

Learning communities have been implemented in colleges and universities across the United States in hopes of providing a holistic student collegiate experience, promoting cross-curricular connections, and increasing student retention rates (Love, 2012). Snyder (2009) defines a learning community as a group of people who possess a common interest in learning and sharing knowledge. Even so, a clear-cut definition of a learning community is difficult to find. Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) describe learning communities in terms of models and structures, such as freshman interest groups and gateway courses. However, it is this elasticity that enables different organizations to invent institution-specific models—some of these based on or adapted from other designs (Ellertson & Thoennes, 2007). Regardless of a learning community's structure, it is its joint focus on both intellectual development and socially embedded learning that help its participants explore deeply interconnected academic curriculum in more authentic ways (Snyder, 2009; Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1994).

Considering the popularity and ubiquity of both learning communities and online learning platforms, it is only natural that these structures have expanded into the digital realm, becoming OLCs. Over the past five years, student affairs staff have taken on instructor roles in OLCs, such as first-year experience or orientation courses, communities that aim to introduce students to campus life or to a specific major (Ellertson & Thoennes, 2007). An OLC is a digital version of a learning community in that it brings together students, faculty, student affairs professionals, and other institutional members who interact and connect with each other within a learning management system (Blanchard & Cook, 2012; Lenning et al., 2013).

Through restricted access, online discussion tools and web 2.0 technologies, online platforms are now able to promote feelings of trust, respect, and connection among members, feelings vital to the maintenance of learning communities (West, 2010). It is also important to note that there is a distinct difference between online communities, informal spaces where individuals with common interests gather, and online *learning* communities (OLCs), formal spaces that promote "collaborative learning and the reflective practice involved in transformative learning" (Oliver, Herrington, Herrington, & Reeves, 2007, p. 4).

In addition, despite the robustness of technology tools, there are differences between online and face-to-face learning communities. Perhaps the most distinctive differences are evident in communication. While VOIP (voice over internet protocol) technologies such as Skype and Google+ Hangout allow for real-time visual exchanges, the majority of discussions in OLCs are conducted through text. These conversations may happen synchronously (through chat tools), or, as is most often the case, asynchronously (through discussion board posts), lasting over the course of several days (West, 2010). The visible and permanent record of these exchanges further impacts communication in OLCs, allowing for deeper reflection on member ideas and contributions.

Designing Online Learning Communities

A common misconception, a *Field of Dreams* mentality, revolves around the building of OLCs. This misconception assumes "if we build it, they will come," an idea born out of the belief that interactive technology tools and feature-rich learning management systems have special and engaging characteristics that automatically establish a functioning OLC. Blanchard and Cook (2012) warn that an emphasis on technology versus design "can easily lead to wasted time and effort for anyone developing an [online learning community]" (p. 93). Rather, research on design of OLCs, and online courses in general, continually states that learning design and pedagogical choices are the most significant factors in the creation of community (Green, Inan, & Denton, 2012; Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007).

Previously in this chapter, we pointed out the flexibility of learning communities, and how this flexibility lends itself to the implementation of unique models and approaches that are institution specific (Lenning et al., 2013). Flexibility is an important component of the concept of learning communities and should not be hampered by templates or strict design prescripts. Even so, there are general characteristics that are of critical importance in the establishment of rich and thriving OLCs. In this section, we highlight the following characteristics: learning design, facilitation for online communication, and interactive technologies.

Learning Design.   When designing learning experiences, whether online or face-to-face, there are several assumptions that can be made about the average adult learner. First, as people mature, they transition from being extrinsically motivated learners to intrinsically motivated learners. Intrinsically motivated learners have a strong need to know the "why" behind learning new material, place a high value on life experiences as learning resources, and demonstrate a preference for information that is immediately relevant to one's daily life (Snyder, 2009). Learning design for the intrinsically motivated incorporates tasks that encourage learners to examine information and materials from multiple viewpoints, both practical and theoretical, drawing upon a broad range of personal and academic

resources (Bransford, Vye, Kinzer, & Risko, 1990). Most importantly, these are tasks designed to replicate, as much as possible, the real-world activities of practicing professionals as opposed to decontextualized classroom exercises (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

Second, and this parallels the transition from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation for learning, adult learners (even young adult learners) shift from a dependent personality toward a more self-directed personality (Snyder, 2009). This characteristic calls for the design of learning experiences that "acknowledge differing learner needs, abilities, and interests; affording personal control and choice to learners" (Roby et al., 2013, p. 30). Note that in an online environment, learner preference can easily be supported through the creation and delivery of multimodal (text, audio, and visual) content. Tasks and interactive learning experiences that include learner choice include this consideration in their outcomes by allowing for multiple, and sometimes competing/contrasting, solutions versus a single expected outcome. Additionally, self-directed learners should be provided with the opportunity to reflect on the learning choices they make, both privately and within the learning community itself, either through task logs, online journal and discussion posts, or short video blogs—activities embedded within the tasks themselves (Oliver et al., 2007).

Third, learning design for young and mature adults acknowledges an evolution in learner orientation from content-centered to problem-centered tasks (Snyder, 2009). In problem-centered tasks, learners are required to define a problem, identify and prioritize subtasks, and work toward a self- or group-identified solution over a longer period of time, whether days, weeks, or months (Bransford et al., 1990). This is not to say that problem-centered tasks take away from any content mastery the OLC is attempting to promote. In fact, problem-centered tasks encourage deeper and more robust learning because while engaging with the problem, learners take on multiple roles, developing an interdisciplinary perspective rather than limiting content mastery to one topic, field, or domain (Jonassen, 1999).

Finally, it is worth considering that problem-centered tasks are opportunities for OLCs to engage members in service learning, a pedagogical approach that has been shown to promote student leadership development, improved academic performance, and rich learning experiences (Love, 2012). For example, OLC members can brainstorm solutions to a general community problem (service opportunity) online and implement solutions individually in their own locations. Members then reflect on the service-learning component with their OLC through discussion posts, chats, or video blogs.

Online Communication and Trust Building.   Learning is oftentimes described as a social endeavor, a process that occurs through continuous conversation, social networks, and community-based practices. When learners are completing learning tasks, they typically turn to conversations and informal social networks for information and help. Amazingly, research

has determined that people would rather exchange information with those who are most accessible over those who are most qualified (Cadima, Ojeda, & Monguet, 2012). Communication and trust, critical ingredients of the social learning process, need to be carefully structured and fostered in an online learning environment. As previously mentioned in this chapter, communication in OLCs (which can happen both synchronously and asynchronously) and consequently, trust building, reflects one of the most distinct differences between online and face-to-face learning communities.

When designers develop OLCs that encourage learner interaction, the strength and success of that community oftentimes depend on the quality of those interactions. This is because a successful OLC develops a group identity—a process that cannot occur without its members first learning about one another, sharing individual identities with each other, and eventually trusting one another (Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005). Trust is considered a key enabler for communication in OLCs (Fang & Chiu, 2010). However, the online platform can oftentimes strip communication of trust-building ingredients: facial expressions, verbal and nonverbal cues. In order to address this challenge, there are several strategies that can be implemented: (a) encourage members to post detailed personal profiles; (b) promote interactive profiles with the use of web 2.0 tools that include video and audio capability such as Glogster or VoiceThread; and (c) establish an off-topic discussion board, an online café, and encourage the posting of pictures and short video or audio responses (Jones et al., 2012). As an additional benefit, members who share both personal and professional information about themselves with the community help build trust by allowing the OLC to better gauge their expertise (Booth, 2012).

Recall the metaphor of the *Field of Dreams* in the design and launch of an OLC. One may implement the suggested strategies at the onset of the OLC, but if trust building and communication within the OLC is not continuously monitored, pruned, and maintained, learner interaction may taper off and disappear altogether. Communication is most likely to occur if OLCs avail themselves of one or several members or instructors who "encourage perspective taking, define norms and expectations, model appropriate communications, foster substantive interaction, provide relevant resources, and define roles and responsibilities for collaborative work" (Beach, 2012, p. 259). These instructors or members function as moderators, facilitators, and monitors.

The individuals chosen to fulfill these roles may vary depending on the structure and design of the OLC and the needs of its participants. Some OLC instructors call on members to individually serve in each of these roles. Instructors often select these members based on previous OLC experience and instructor–member relationships (Booth, 2012). Other OLC instructors prefer to assume all three roles. This option tends to be utilized in OLCs consisting of students who are new to the college experience or unfamiliar with online platforms.

Moderators.   The job of a moderator is to seed discussions and to scaffold structured conversations. He or she works to move communication exchanges beyond the superficial (Booth, 2012). Much of the work of the moderator happens behind the scenes. This individual may help shape knowledge by modifying or building upon existing posts; however, he or she does not contribute original ideas. Instead, the moderator pushes the OLC forward by comparing and contrasting learner perspectives, reconciling areas of commonality, and questioning stark differences. In this manner, he or she provides support, as well as a model, for members who would like to take on more leadership within the OLC. Moderators also help new community members integrate into the OLC by pushing all learners (regardless of initial level of participation) to contribute (Singh & Holt, 2013).

Facilitators.   The facilitator affirms and encourages participation. In several ways, the facilitator can be described as a servant leader who highlights the value in member contributions, gently guiding learners into a state of interdependency and reciprocity (Bunt-Kokhuis & Sultan, 2012). The role of the facilitator involves motivating and inspiring all learners to engage in successful dialogue. Booth (2012) logged a motivating email sent by Henry, an OLC's facilitator, to a member: "Charles, I'd like to tell you how much I enjoy your thoughtful posts. You've become an important member of the community. Keep up the good work" (p. 15). Facilitators carefully connect the content and topic of the OLC to the individual context and cultural backgrounds of the OLC's members. In making these connections, facilitators guide members through the process of reading and interpreting messages online in such a way that members become critical online listeners—"aware of filters such as biases, judgments and attitudes that affect how they interpret messages" (West, 2010, p. 72). Through critical online listening, OLC members develop the ability to assess the applicability of their own ideas and assumptions in relation to others in the community, building a shared sense of meaning and community values (Bunt-Kokhuis & Sultan, 2012).

Monitors.   Paul, an OLC member, described the importance of his community's monitor: "People need to feel they can be together and carry on with their social discourse without fear of attack. When people come into the community with 'their guns a blazing' he has to be the sheriff. That is a critical part of sustaining trust to me" (Booth, 2012, p. 17). As evidenced in Paul's description, a monitor is mostly concerned with helping members maintain appropriate and trustworthy online behavior. This can be accomplished in several ways. The monitor should take the time to clearly explain the rules of online communication, going so far as to post a community's netiquette policy where it is easily accessed and reviewed. The monitor might work with the OLC members to jointly develop communication policy and procedures, a choice that can empower members to take ownership and responsibility for their own online behavior (Bunt-Kokhuis & Sultan, 2012).

Others have found it beneficial to create and share monthly newsletters that remind OLC members of those policies, as well as the overall learning goals for that community.

Interactive Technologies.   Those new to online learning and learning management systems are typically very concerned with functional and technical issues (Green et al., 2012). Because technology is the mediator and principal vehicle in an OLC, the way members engage with technology— and how successful they feel in that engagement—can have profound consequences for the development of a sense of community (West, 2010). Therefore, the selection of technology tools and how these are employed are important considerations in the design of OLCs. When selecting technology tools, consider that online materials should support diverse presentation methods, multimodal content, learner preference and control, and collaborative, electronic exchange.

Technology changes at a rapid pace and keeping up with newer tools can be a daunting task. In addition, learning management system tools can be cumbersome, while paid-for software like Adobe Connect might disappear when institutional funding is rerouted. Free and open-source web 2.0 technologies are an attractive solution to these issues and can be used by OLC members even after their participation concludes (Jones et al., 2012). We have compiled a list of the more commonly used tools at our own institution. Although the recommended list below is by no means exhaustive or appropriate for every OLC or student affairs professional, they represent a starting point for exploration. We encourage the selection of one or two for inclusion in each new iteration of an OLC so that no designer or learner is overburdened with technology concerns.

- Curation and personal learning networks: RebelMouse, Scoop.it, Flipboard, and Zite.
- Digital storytelling: VoiceThread and Animoto.
- Electronic storage: Google Drive, Dropbox, and Evernote.
- Interactive images: ThingLink, Voki, and Blabberize.
- Open source learning management systems: Edmodo, Google+, and Schoology.
- Polling: Polldaddy, Google Forms, and SurveyMonkey.
- Screencasting: Screencast-O-Matic and Jing.
- Video playlists: YouTube and Mag.ma.
- Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP): Skype, Google+ Hangout with Calendar feature.
- Wikis and website creators: PB Wiki, Weebly, SnapPages, Google Sites.

Most of the tools listed above have collaborative features, can be combined with other web 2.0 technologies for enhancement of those features, come in both free and pro options, and are available as mobile applications for both iOS and Android platforms.

Benefits of Online Learning Communities in Student Affairs

Learning communities help students engage with each other and with university life and culture by integrating members both socially and academically into the institutional environment (Tinto, 1997, 2004). OLCs function in much the same way, offering similar advantages to students and student affairs professionals.

Establishing a Sense of Community.   Students who feel connected to the institution are more likely to remain at that institution (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Harris, 2006–2007; Tinto, 1997, 2004). Participation in OLCs requires students to have regular interaction with many members of the academy, cementing connections that inherently serve as a retention tool. Those within OLCs have the luxury of nurturing community connections asynchronously: anytime and anywhere, without the constraints of time, situation, or place. OLCs offer the flexibility that residential or campus-based learning communities do not. For commuters, fully online students, or those attending community colleges, OLCs provide a means of connection for students who might not otherwise participate.

Involvement in an OLC serves as a way for students to connect to the university as a whole, and individually to faculty members, staff, and peers, whether they are physically on campus or not. These connections, defined as *closeness centrality*, are crucial to knowledge construction, resource sharing, and the exchange of tacit or implicit information (Hansen, 2002). OLCs provide the proximity and close, trusting relationships needed to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness often felt by students (Liu et al., 2007; Nicpon et al., 2006–2007). Closeness centrality developed in OLCs also can lead to academic confidence. Liu et al. (2007) reported that when OLC students indicated feeling a strong sense of community, they also perceived themselves to be more engaged, satisfied, and successful in their own learning.

Enhancing Student Learning.   Students involved in OLCs can help each other to acquire and retain knowledge. Information shared at a campus program or meeting is delivered to students all at once. For some students, this method of delivery may not be ideal, as it is easy for details to be missed or lost. Those who are not able to attend these meetings may miss out on valuable information.

In OLCs that operate asynchronously, students have the ability to review a video, reread an online chart, or retake a test, accessing materials and asking questions at their own pace—a strong advantage for international and English language learner student populations, for example. They also can read the questions and responses of others and incorporate those ideas into their own learning. OLCs deliver information in multimodal ways (text, audio, and video), while online platforms allow for the integration of universal learning principles. Therefore, involvement in OLCs supports students of varied learning preferences and abilities.

OLCs provide students with high accessibility to those who can help aid in learning and knowledge acquisition. They offer students a chance to access these resources and information under the guidance and tutelage of their peers and student affairs mentors. For students who may be afraid to ask a question, or who may not know what questions to ask, this setting is especially helpful. Students get the answers they need in a low-risk environment, while both faculty and student affairs professionals feel a part of the process in a noninvasive way. OLCs are settings "in which student affairs professionals can explicitly demonstrate their roles as facilitators of student learning and partners in the educational process—that is, as teachers" (Ellertson & Thoennes, 2007, p. 35).

Professional Online Learning Communities.   While the focus of this chapter is on OLCs as they pertain to students, we would be remiss if we failed to mention OLC opportunities for student affairs professionals and faculty members. While not directly involving students, the benefits that OLCs bring to faculty and staff impact students in multiple ways.

Online professional learning communities serve as a forum for professionals to network and collaborate both socially and professionally (Beach, 2012). The existence of places for professionals to share ideas in a structured way on a variety of topics is extremely beneficial and has a positive effect on both knowledge and practice (Beach, 2012; Masters, de Kramer, O'Dwyer, Dash, & Russell, 2010). Members of professional OLCs are able to "continually inquire into their practice and, as a result, discover, create, and negotiate new meanings that improve their practice . . . " (National Council of Teachers of English, 2010, p. 1). For example, a professional learning community could be created around the topic of crisis intervention. Members of the professional OLC could share experiences around a specific crisis, which in turn is available for other members to utilize at their discretion. Members available for consultation can help clarify issues and concerns about that topic. Professional products such as documents, strategies, and tools, uniquely tailored to the needs of the profession, are generated. These materials "have increased meaning because the explicit knowledge requires the tacit knowledge inherent in the community to be applied" (Booth, 2012, p. 5). Similarly, since OLCs are self-contained and only accessible to members, they provide a safe space for student affairs staff to reflect and try out new ideas and practices (Beach, 2012).

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the idea of OLCs and explored how these can be developed and utilized in student affairs settings. Technology is a part of today's higher education learning environment, whether a student lives on campus, in town, in another state, or in another country. As student affairs professionals we should create, monitor, and maintain OLCs, instilling in members a sense of history filled with common interests and shared

pride. As the gatekeepers and guides of OLCs, we should, through our own example, encourage members to participate and actively engage with each other. We should create and participate in professional OLCs, so that we can also benefit from mutual support and guidance in order to provide the best learning experiences for our students. The more comfortable we become with using technology and the tools and affordances it makes available, the better equipped we are to lead our students in their pursuit of lifelong learning in the 21st century.

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