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Sense of Community

Kreijns, Kirschner, and Jochems (2002) maintain that one cannot assume that desirable social interaction will occur naturally by the instructional design. Online instructors must also attend to sociopsychological objectives that are separate from instructional ones. One such objective is building sense of community in a collaborative learning environment. Wegerif (1998) writes, "forming a sense of community, where people feel they will be treated sympathetically by their fellows, seems to be a necessary first step for collaborative learning" (p. 48).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe a sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). Royal and Rossi (1997) argue that common goals and values are also essential elements of community, and Strike (2004) theorizes that normation (i.e., the willingness of students to internalize group-shared expectations) is an important aspect of a learning community. According to Strike (2004):

Community begins in learning the norms of those who care for and about us, and ends in caring for and about those whose norms we share. ... [P]eople begin to internalize the norms of communities because someone cares about them enough to share something they value. Normation begins with caring and belonging, not reasoning and not nature, (pp. 221–222)

Social interaction is the primary mode of fostering a sense of community. Students in a classroom setting should have feelings of belonging, trust, safety, participation, and support. More specifically, students should feel that they matter to the other members of their educational group, that they have responsibilities to the group, and that each member's educational needs will be met via a commitment to shared educational goals.

A strong sense of community builds social capital, that is, it increases resources that are available through an individual's social networks to construct new knowledge and understanding. Research (e.g., Rovai & Ponton, 2005) supports the notion "that sense of community and student learning are highly related constructs in ALN [asynchronous learning network] environments" (p. 85). Moreover, major studies on e-learning in higher education provide substantial evidence that active participation positively influences student satisfaction (Alavi & Dufner, 2005) and retention rates (Rovai, 2002).

Thus, a responsibility incumbent upon the online instructor is to create a learning environment that fosters a sense of community via positive social interactions. This goal is supported when the instructor:

- Promotes interaction
- Communicates respect for diverse perspectives and backgrounds
- Monitors interaction and intervenes with nonparticipants in a manner that respectfully addresses psychosocial or structural impediments
- Encourages students to create their own mechanisms of interaction (e.g., online study groups or e-mail)

Provides timely feedback and maintains teacher presence in the virtual classroom.

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