

Developing Learner-Led Knowledge Generating Online Communities

J. Ana Donaldson, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor of Educational Technology
University of Northern Iowa

Rita-Marie Conrad, Ph.D.
Online Instructor and Evaluator
RMC eDesign

Educational practitioners are faced consistently with the task of providing increased opportunities for engaging students in beneficial online learning. The learner's perception of herself as a valued contributor in the learning community is a key component. The "a-ha" moment often occurs when learners recognize that they are knowledge generators, not only for themselves, but also for the community as a whole.

Engaged learning is not a new approach, but its application in an online environment requires special consideration in order to maximize learning. The challenge is the facilitation by educators and learners to move from the traditional passive lecture-based learning environment to the appropriate dynamically-evolved engaged online community where learners become knowledge generators. In this ideal online community, students are "the principle arbiter in making judgments as to what, when, and how learning will occur" (Hannafin, 1992).

Engaged learning does not simply happen. It requires "architectural engineering" by the instructor. Planning and utilizing activities that assist a learner in moving through the development phases of engaged learning ensures that learners are motivated and able to successfully interact, collaborate and eventually independently engage in an online learning environment.

The Phases of Engagement model (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004) provides a framework within which activities are planned to assist a novice learner in becoming an engaged online participant. The model's structured approach for creating an online learning community adopts a four-phased methodology, with evolving roles and responsibilities identified for both the learners and the instructor. Specific types of activities are assigned for each of the identified phases, and guidelines for assessing effectiveness and learner engagement are included. The Community Development Plan (Boettcher & Conrad, 2004) provides a methodology for planning activities with increasing levels of interaction and student collaboration for each of the Phases of Engagement.

Phases of Engagement Model

The goal of the Phases of Engagement model is to provide an effective methodology for facilitating the student transition from being a novice learner to being a member of a learning community. This type of student empowerment "is both a critical element and a desired outcome of participation in an online learning community" (Palloff and Pratt, 1999).

The Phases of Engagement framework initially began as a tool to manage and to provide the level of online communication and provide learners and instructors with a perspective on their new roles in the online environment. This structure provides a methodology for developing effective activities and sequencing them to maximize the learning opportunities that occur as a result of those activities. Novice online learners start with introductory community-building exercises that build trust and assist a group in learning how to work together. Learners are then guided through additional phases as they gain more confidence and expertise in interaction and course content.

The following table describes each phase, participant role, suggested time frame within a standard 12 to 16 week course, and the related processes per identified phase (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, p.11).

Phases of Engagement				
Phase	Learner	Instructor	Weeks	Process
1	Newcomer	Social Negotiator	1-2	Instructor provides activities that are interactive and help the learners get to know one another. Expresses expectations for engagement in the course. Provides orientation to course and keeps learners on track. Examples: icebreakers, individual introductions, discussions concerning community issues such as Netiquette rules in a Virtual Lounge.
2	Cooperator	Structural Engineer	3-4	Instructor forms dyads of learners and provides activities that require critical thinking, reflection and sharing of ideas. Examples: Peer reviews, activity critiques.
3	Collaborator	Facilitator	5-6	Instructor provides activities that require small groups to collaborate, problem solve, reflect upon experiences. Examples: content discussions, role plays, debates, jigsaws.
4	Initiator/Partner	Community Member / Challenger	7-16	Activities are learner-designed and/or learner-led. Group presentations and projects. Discussions begin to go not only where the instructor intends but also where the learner directs them to go. Examples: Group presentations and projects, learner-facilitated discussions.

An instructor needs not be an adamant constructivist to believe in learner engagement. As is pointed out by Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, and Tinker (2000) “There is strong evidence to suggest that learners learn best when constructing their own knowledge. However, there is also a right time to clearly guide learners or simply give them a critical piece of information to help them move forward” (p. 97). Following this philosophy means that the acquisition of knowledge is centered on the learners and their interactions and not solely on a lecture-focused, instructor-centered approach.

Designing Activities that Succeed

The Community of Development Plan (Boettcher & Conrad, 2004) identifies the characteristics and developmental steps necessary to successfully implement the four phases of engagement. The initial phase in the Phases of Engagement model is focused on the instructor’s providing activities that are interactive, assisting the learners in getting to know one another, and increasing student comfort levels with course-related technology. Course expectations are described and the community-building period is initiated. Activities tend to be enjoyable and may include icebreakers, individual introductions, and discussions concerning community issues such as Netiquette rules in a Virtual Lounge.

It is important to note that content-related engaged activities should not begin until a learner has completed the initial phase and moved solidly into the second phase. This is not to say that a learner in the initial phase cannot do content-related activities. Rather, the most appropriate types of activities at this particular point would be completed without a partner or team.

The second phase involves the instructor forming dyads (teams of 2) of learners and provides activities that require critical thinking, reflection, and sharing of ideas. This is the phase where course content is introduced into the online activities. Effective types of dyad tasks include peer reviews and activity critiques.

The third phase normally is achieved at the beginning of the second month of a three to four month course. The student becomes a collaborator within the instructional environment and the instructor's role becomes one of a facilitator of student interaction and learning. The instructor provides activities that require small groups to collaborate, problem solve, reflect upon experiences. Examples of these types of activities include content discussions, role plays, debates, and jigsaws.

The most difficult phase to reach is the final one of learner-initiated and learner-led activities. Gagne, Briggs and Wager define the five kinds of learning outcomes as intellectual skill, attitude, verbal information, cognitive strategy, and motor skill (1992). The first three types lend themselves best to learner-led activities because the activities can be more easily accomplished in an online learning environment. Learner-led activities can be almost anything described thus far or anything the learner can imagine. Presentations, discussions, role-plays, debates, games, and so forth, can all be developed and led by learners instead of the instructor. The key is to ensure that learning objectives are clearly stated and that learners are choosing the right type of activity based upon the expressed objectives and expected outcomes. This model assumes that learners are novice activity leaders and therefore should be encouraged to keep their activities simple both from a pedagogical and technological perspective.

Learner-led activities need ample time to develop. The following is a suggested approach:

- Discuss the concept of learner-led activities from the very beginning of the course, as many learners may need to be oriented to the idea of leading a class activity.
- Provide a detailed description of the activity and responsibilities of the learners in the syllabus.
- Encourage learners to begin thinking about the activities after the first 25% of the course has been completed.
- Provide time in the course calendar for learners to begin planning the activities around the middle of the semester.
- Schedule instructor-team discussion time for the activities several weeks before the team is scheduled to lead an activity. The instructor serves as counselor and consultant.

One of the most important aspects of student-led activities is to make sure that learners know what the activity outcomes should be in the context of the overall course plan. Once the learners know the required outcomes, they may develop additional ones as appropriate for the activity. The expected outcomes of an activity should be stated in the syllabus so that learners know from the very beginning of the course what they will be expected to accomplish through their activity.

What if learners are experienced in the online environment? Can phases be skipped? While it may be possible to move more quickly through the phases, it is still recommended to use at least one activity from each phase in order to help learners become oriented to the course and become familiar with the new set of peers who will be working together in the online environment

Assessing for Effectiveness

The assessment of student engagement is especially challenging in an online environment where the student feedback is usually textual and not visual. The key element to consider

is how appropriate is the activity for use in an engaged learning environment. The instructor needs to analyze in what ways this activity will contribute to engaged learning using the following questions:

- Will the activity help learners use the online tools?
- Does it assist in the social process needed to establish community?
- What type of interaction or collaboration with peers occurs?
- Is reflection required?
- Will a particular problem be resolved?

The instructor should also consider in which phase of engagement the activity could be classified and whether the activity is placed appropriately in the sequence of the course. For example, a Phase 4 student-led discussion activity should not occur in the first few weeks of a course, because the learning community has not been adequately prepared. To introduce it prematurely would guarantee its failure.

Smith & Ragan (1999) caution that learner enthusiasm and engagement do not always equate with learning. Activities that lack an instructional goal and purpose will fail in creating a deeper level of community and knowledge acquisition even though they may be fun and interactive. Beware of what they term the “activity for activity’s sake” approach. (p. 17) Sequencing and using activities as defined in the 4-phase approach will assist you in avoiding the use of meaningless activities.

Final Thoughts

“I would hope that most instructors these days would understand that more learning takes place in these type of activities than many times will in a more traditional way. Not to take away from the instructor-led portions of the classes at all, but the learner learns on many more levels when faced with this type of approach. I would say to an instructor that if their goal is to have the students truly understand what they are learning, this approach is much better. If the students have to be active participants, they will invest more of themselves, as well as time, into the course.”

The above student words validate the Phases of Engagement model and the Community Development Plan from a learner's perspective. Creating a learning community through online activities is not about the technology: it is dependent upon effective planning and an understanding of how to create a collaborative and safe environment between the instructor and learners. Learners need to become participants in their own knowledge generation as instructors share in new learning opportunities and evolving learning environments. The new battle cry has become: "Learning is not a spectator sport" (Chickering & Gamson, 2003).

References

- Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R. (2004). *Faculty guide for moving teaching and learning to the Web* (2nd ed.). Mission Viejo, CA: League for Innovation.
- Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. E. (2003). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *Wingspread Journal* (special edition). Retrieved May 27, 2004, from <http://www.uncg.edu/tlc/seven.html>
- Collison, G., Elbaum, B., Haavind, S., & Tinker, R. (2000). *Facilitating online learning: Effective strategies for moderators*. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.

- Conrad, R., & Donaldson, J. A. (2004). *Engaging the online learner: Activities and resources for creative learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gagne, R., Briggs, L., & Wager, W. (1992). *Principles of instructional design* (4th ed.). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Hannafin, M. J. (1992). Emerging technologies, ISD, and leaving environments: Critical perspectives. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 40, 49-64.
- Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Smith, P.L., & Ragan, T. J. (1999). *Instructional design* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Biographical Sketches

Dr. J. Ana Donaldson is an Assistant Professor of Educational Technology at the University of Northern Iowa. For many years, she has presented workshops to in-service and pre-service teachers on how to integrate technology into an engaged learning environment. Her workshops provide guidelines and practical strategies for effectively using technology to apply the principles of engaged learning within today's classroom. Besides her years of classroom experience in creating web supported learning environments, she is a published author, keynote speaker and international presenter. She has presented at conferences sponsored by the International Visual Literacy Association, the University of Wisconsin, the Association for Educational Communication and Technology (AECT) and the Iowa Distance Learning Association (IDLA) on a variety of engaged learning topics. She is co-author of *Engaging the Online Learner: Activities for Creative Instruction* (2004).

Address: 1920 Belle Avenue
Cedar Falls, IA 50613
E-mail: ana.donaldson@uni.edu
Phone: 319.415.1920

Rita-Marie Conrad is a faculty member, author and the principle for *RMC eDesign* where she focuses on the issues related to online course design, instruction and evaluation. Rita currently teaches courses concerning learning theories and developing online instruction in the School of Education at Capella University and presently provides training to K-12 teachers and community college and university faculty across the nation in a workshop sponsored by the Learning Resources Network (LERN). She has been the head of instructional development, responsible for managing the development and delivery of web-based courses, and an online faculty member with the School of Information Studies at Florida State University. She was the first online faculty member for Florida State University's graduate program in instructional systems with a major in distance learning and was instrumental in the development of the program. Rita is coauthor of *Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction* (Jossey-Bass, 2004) as well as the *Faculty Guide for Moving Teaching and Learning to the Web* (2nd ed, League for Innovation, 2004.) and *Assessing Online Distance Learners* (Prentice-Hall, in press).

Address: 7540 Preservation Road
Tallahassee, FL 32312
E-mail: rconrad@attglobal.net
Phone: 850.321.4170