Your Presence is a Present: Fostering Community in LMS, Blended, and Online Environments

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Your Presence is a Present: Fostering Community in LMS, Blended, and Online Environments

Summary
The increase in online course offerings and instruction in higher education, coupled with the continued rise of MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses), means that it is now more imperative than ever for instructors to reflect on their digital teaching practices. This rise has caused faculty members to not only adapt their current teaching methods to online environments, but simultaneously address attrition: "one of the biggest challenges to distance education" (Dueber and Misanchuk, 2001). Although the responsibilities of an instructor can vary based on the nature and format of the course (i.e. face-to-face vs. blended learning), developing a sense of community is particularly integral for students learning in an online environment. Allowing participants to feel connected to their fellow students, teachers, and even the course content is central to student success. However, we as educators need to resist token expressions of online community-building (e.g. using learning management systems like Sakai ‘passively’ rather than ‘actively’) and commit to being present for our students. In this workshop, participants will learn new ways to foster a sense of community in their online platforms and courses, while investigating how the creation of an online teaching presence can further engage participants.

Keywords
classroom community, online classroom environments, online teaching presence

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Jason Ribeiro

SUMMARY
The increase in online course offerings and instruction in higher education, coupled with the continued rise of MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses), means that it is now more imperative than ever for instructors to reflect on their digital teaching practices. This rise has caused faculty members to not only adapt their current teaching methods to online environments, but simultaneously address attrition: “one of the biggest challenges to distance education” (Dueber and Misanchuk, 2001). Although the responsibilities of an instructor can vary based on the nature and format of the course (i.e. face-to-face vs. blended learning), developing a sense of community is particularly integral for students learning in an online environment. Allowing participants to feel connected to their fellow students, teachers, and even the course content is central to student success. However, we as educators need to resist token expressions of online community-building (e.g. using learning management systems like Sakai ‘passively’ rather than ‘actively’) and commit to being present for our students. In this workshop, participants will learn new ways to foster a sense of community in their online platforms and courses, while investigating how the creation of an online teaching presence can further engage participants.

KEYWORDS: classroom community, online classroom environments, online teaching presence

LEARNING OUTCOMES
By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:
• maintain an online teaching presence in courses to increase student engagement;
• employ strategies from the relevant scholarship on online community building that combats attrition and fosters and sustains classroom community;
• gather descriptive feedback from their peers about the community-building capacity of a course assignment.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Lee and Choi (2010) conduct an appraisal of existing empirical studies (published in peer-reviewed journals) from 1999 to 2009 that examine the dropout factors influencing students in post-secondary online courses. This is an incredibly important timeframe to examine, as it is the era where online education experienced drastic growth around the world. The researchers identified 69 factors that influence participant’s decisions to drop online courses and organized them into three main categories: a) Student factors, b) Course/Program factors, and c) Environmental factors. To overcome these factors, the following strategies were suggested: a) understanding each student’s challenges and
potential, b) providing quality course activities and well-structured supports, and c) handling environmental issues and emotional challenges. Clay et al., (2009) suggest that the results of their appraisal and the strategies proposed improved retention rates in higher education institutions.

This study is useful reading for both the workshop facilitator and participants as it provides a great overview of the distinct problems (and possible solutions) presented by online education. Participants will be encouraged to go through the tables in the article and identify the factors that challenge their role as online/blended instructors, and factors that they are wary of addressing due to lack of first-hand experience. Pairing theoretical information with practical strategies makes this article unique in the field of educational research. Ultimately, being ‘present’ for students is paramount.


Rovai (2002) seeks to challenge the notion that “strong sense of community is limited to the traditional classroom and proposes that the virtual classroom has the potential of building and sustaining sense of community at levels that are comparable to the traditional classroom” (p. 1). Focusing on course design principles, Rovai acknowledges that extra strains are placed on both facilitators and learners in online environments. Nonetheless, effective course design and pedagogy are vital in successfully facilitating and creating community in any higher education course. Rovai defines classroom community in terms of four dimensions: spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectation and goals.

Workshop participants will benefit from this reading because the study recognizes distance and online education environments as unique, but related to traditional classroom environments and pedagogy. Rovai suggests alleviating the demands of online instruction is possible through an awareness of seven factors (rooted in professional literature) that positively foster a sense of community: a) Transactional Distance, b) Social Presence, c) Social Equality, d) Small Group Activities, e) Group Facilitation, f) Teaching Style and Learning Stage, and g) Community Size.


The researchers put forth a reflective essay that “shares experiences of building online communities through collaboration from its three authors, who possess varying degrees of experience and expertise in online teaching” (Coaplen, Hollis, and Bailey, 2013, p.1). The authors present a narrative research design, using the perspectives of a tenure-track professor, an instructional designer, and an instructional librarian. The accounts include the instructors’ and students’ use of Blackboard forums, YouTube, Wikispaces, screen capture programming (e.g. Camtasia), blogs (e.g. Blogger), and countless other tools that foster student-instructor interaction. For success with building digital learning communities of practice, the researchers provide six characteristics of successful online
communities for readers to utilize, as well as point out the various pitfalls and successes of new instructors. Seeing as this workshop is designed to accommodate instructors of varying experience with online, distance, and blended teaching (and learning), this article provides contextual information, which each and every participant will find relatable. First-person perspectives are invaluable for learning and the work of Coaplen, Hollis, and Bailey (2013) will allow participants to be more comfortable listening to and/or sharing personal experiences during the activities that follow.


Brown (2001) conducts a theoretical study that draws on adult distance learning students’ respective definitions of (the phenomenon) of community. Not only does the article add new research to a lacking area of scholarship, it is meant to “provide background for curriculum designers and facilitators of distance learning classes, regardless of the field” (Brown, 2001, p. 19). She encourages both instructors and institutions to promote networking and collaboration between participants even after an online course ends (e.g. using e-mail) to further develop a classroom and alumni community. Utilizing (new and veteran) student experiences from online courses, Brown was able to identify three levels of community: 1) making online acquaintances or friends, 2) community membership or conferment, and 3) camaraderie after long-term association. Each of these levels of community involved a greater level of participant engagement.

Instructors often overlook the difference in experience between new students and veteran students in online environments. Brown sheds light on the struggles of participants who have never taken a distance or blended course and are unfamiliar with the respective technologies, compared to peers who regularly take online offerings. In order to move beyond this division, the researcher took all the data from open and axial coding to create fifteen steps that address community-building in computer-mediated asynchronous classes. This framework, along with several (data-driven) theoretical propositions, will allow workshop participants to engage with school-specific data from the twenty-one distance students involved in the research.

### CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration (Min)</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>Note: Pre-Workshop Tasks are outlined in the Presentation Strategies section. To begin, the facilitator should introduce him/herself, welcome the participants to the workshop, and</td>
<td>Create teaching presence (that is translatable to online environments). Prepare participants for the next 120 minutes and keeps the facilitator cognizant of time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
present the agenda for the session. Immediately following the introduction, the facilitator should engage the group in the chosen icebreaker activity.

Distribute the workshop handout: “Your Presence is a Present: Fostering Community in LMS, Blended, and Online Environments” (Appendix A).

| 25 | **Module 1**  
Introducing Community: Key Community-Building Factors | Using the “Factors that Positively Impact Community-Building in Online Courses” document (Appendix B) the facilitator introduces the five main insights through a mini-lecture. For the first factor, *Creating a Social Presence*, show the following video to participants as a great example for instructors is the creation of a course introduction video: ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HR9AN4pc-k)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HR9AN4pc-k)  
Video ends at (4:40 mark). For the second factor, *Decreasing Transactional Distance*, ask participants to offer examples of how they use their course platform/online tools (i.e. LMS, Twitter, etc.) to increase participation. When explaining the *Quality Course Activities* factor, be sure to note that this factor will come up again in the next part of the workshop. | Introduce participants to the key community-building factors contained in the literature. Propose strategies they can employ to combat attrition and foster/sustain community in their online courses. Furthermore, participants will now become more comfortable in assessing the quality of their peers’ assignments in Module 2. Demonstrate how instructors can create an introductory video for their course, providing participants with a practical and effective way to create a social presence and dictate the tone for their course. Asking attendees for examples on how they engage their students via... |
the use of online tools not only serves to share best practices but provides participants with concrete examples of technology’s role in online learning.

| 40 | **Module 2**
| **Supporting Community: Assignment Roundtable** | This module uses the “Community-Building Assignment Template” (Appendix C) that each participant completed prior to the session. In a roundtable group of 3-5 people, attendees will ask their peers for feedback on a current assignment they intend to use for an online/blended course they are instructing or are in the midst of designing. Each participant should have 5-7 minutes to gather feedback. Use the “Factors that Positively Impact Community-Building in Online Courses” document (Appendix B) to evaluate the assignments. Some guidelines for evaluating the community-building capacity of an online course are as follows:

- Ensure the instructor has strategies to establish an online teaching presence
- Ask questions regarding the feedback provided to students, the types of completed activities, etc.
- Inquire if the instructor has plans to improve the level of student engagement in the class
| Contribute to the creation/re-design of a personal/professional artifact affected by individual and group learning. In this case, the assignment description. Each participant (no matter what career level they are currently at) will be fulfilling the role of instructional designer, teacher, and student in this exercise. Not only will they share their honest opinions/experiences about another peer’s work, but they will also be able to think about the assignment from an instructor (more personal) perspective and from the viewpoint of the students we aim to support and teach. Note: Please ensure that any feedback relayed to one’s peers is constructive in nature (i.e. suggestions are specific, supportive, and do not overload the individual). |
| 35 | Module 3 Sustaining Community: Problem Solving Activity | Create three new groups and assign each group a problem-solving scenario and contextual questions (Appendix D). Groups should spend approximately 15 minutes discussing the scenario and questions. In the remaining 15 minutes, gather the whole group’s attention and ask each small group to share what they discussed. The onus is on the facilitator to make connections between different group perspectives and to push the conversation forward. | Contemplate solutions to common problems for instructors in online/blended courses. The facilitator can choose how to communicate the scenarios to the groups (e.g., PowerPoint slide, cue card, etc.) Participants will use the readings and their professional experience to create best practices for each scenario. The module will end with a large group take-up conversation aimed at disseminating the strategies brainstormed by each group so that everyone can benefit from the exercise. |
| 10 | Debrief | Thank the participants for participating and answer any final questions. Restate the learning objectives of the session and summarize what the group accomplished. Distribute and collect the workshop evaluation form (Appendix E). | The debrief allows participants to reflect on their experience in the workshop. The written feedback allows both the facilitator and writer to gauge what went well and how the workshop could improve in the future. |

**Total Time:** 120 minutes

**PRESENTATION STRATEGIES**

Given the collaborative nature of this workshop, the facilitator should be familiar with fostering community in a learning environment and recognize its importance in the session’s effectiveness. While the pre-workshop tasks and specific instructions below, it is important that during the 90-minute session, the facilitator should consider:

a) Establish an Instructor Presence
   - Facilitators must be ‘present’ for the entire session and move between groups, give feedback, and direction to participants. Modeling instructor presence
directly benefits participant learning because it allows attendees to see and feel what the facilitator brings to the learning environment. The facilitator should also be comfortable speaking in large and small group settings. Reviewing the readings and activities prior to facilitating is highly important.

b) Utilize Audio/Visual Resources
   o Consider beginning the workshop with a PowerPoint or Prezi slideshow that includes the day’s agenda and other pertinent information. This strategy will keep the day’s objectives and tasks organized and further engage participants.

### Pre-Workshop Tasks and Instructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Create “PLN Google Doc”                   | A workshop on fostering community could not function without entrenched community-building elements. It is important that participants are given an opportunity to expand their Professional Learning Networks. This can be organized by:  
   o Creating a Google Doc. Document should resemble sample in Appendix F (facilitator will need a Google account).  
   o Invite attendees to fill out their personal profile via e-mail (change Sharing settings to “Anyone with the link”). |
| E-mail Assignment Template to Participants| Ask participants to arrive with an assignment description that would benefit from a well-established sense of community. They may draw examples from an online, blended, or face-to-face class, or sample assignments can be used for those not currently in an instructing role. In order to ensure that each participant’s community-building assignment description looks the same, please e-mail them the “Community-Building Assignment Template” (Appendix C) in advance of the workshop.  
   Also ask participants to consider the strategies they have employed in their teaching careers that have established a positive community setting in their courses. Let them know their answers will form part of the workshop discussion. |
| Reserve Learning Space                    | It is important that the workshop space promotes collaboration and teamwork. Organizers should find a room where they can arrange the tables into small pods (3-5 participants/pod) and allows the facilitator to travel between groups. Limit attendees to 20 per session in order to support in-depth interactions during group work and discussion. |
| Brainstorm Creative Ice Breaker Activity  | This workshop does not seek to hinder its facilitator but empower them. Rather than force a welcome activity on the |
leader, the individual has complete freedom on how to engage the participants. This can be accomplished by any means the facilitator deems the most comfortable and most effective. A suggested/sample icebreaker activity is included in Appendix G, if needed.

| Assign Groups and Make Name Cards/Tags | Organize groups at random or according to information compiled in the “PLN Google Doc” (e.g., cluster participants from similar disciplines or experience levels). Participants should be identifiable to everyone in attendance through individual name cards/tags. They should receive a copy of the “Factors that Positively Impact Community-Building in Online Courses” document (Appendix B). Finally, groups should rotate between Modules 2 and 3 to allow participants to interact with as many peers as possible. |

**ADDITIONAL REFERENCES**


APPENDIX A: Handout #1 “Your Presence is a Present: Fostering Community in LMS, Blended, and Online Environments”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Module</th>
<th>Questions and Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introducing Community: Key Community Building Factors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Community: Assignment Roundtable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustaining Community: Problem Solving Activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Name: ________________________________
### COMMUNITY-BUILDING FACTORS

#### Creating a Social Presence
- A sense of community is innately tied to an instructor’s social presence.
- In any online or blended course, instructors must plan (in advance) how a social presence will be created and sustained (Rovai, 2002)
- Examples: create a course introduction video ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HR9AN4pc-k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HR9AN4pc-k)), create a mutual sense of interaction (i.e. weighing in on student comments, giving feedback, etc.)

#### Decreasing Transactional Distance
- Instructors should manipulate the communications media available and their course design to increase student participation and combat the psychological distance between participants and instructors (Brown, 2001; Rovai, 2002).
- Examples: conduct weekly live chats over Twitter, conduct monthly Skype sessions in distance courses, etc.

#### Inclusivity
- Instructors must ensure that participants do not dominate discussions as that can lead to a sense of community being threatened. Strategies should promote inclusive course discussion (Lee and Choi, 2010; Rovai 2002).
- Examples: participant introductions during the first week of classes, having “offline” chats with aggressive students, soliciting views from more passive students, etc.

#### Quality Course Activities
- Instructors need to provide quality course activities and well-structured supports (Lee and Choi, 2010).
- Instructors should augment individual learning activities with organized small group activities that allow students to interact and make deeper connections with one another (Rovai, 2002).
- Examples: debates, collaborative projects, teacher led discussion groups, etc.

#### Align Teaching Style and Learning Stage
- The ultimate goal should be for teachers to match the student’s stage of self-direction and encourage the student to progress towards further self-direction (Rovai, 2002).
- Examples: differentiated instruction activities, personalized learning opportunities, etc.
APPENDIX C: Handout #3 “Community-Building Assignment Template”

Assignment Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary: Describe the assignment and types of activities involved.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Strategies: What steps are you taking to foster/sustain community?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback: How will you relay feedback to students?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D: Problem Solving Activity

Note: The facilitator may choose how to present and assign the various scenarios to the workshop participants

This workshop relies on problem solving scenarios as catalysts for analysis and instruction. Participants are encouraged to use their own experiences and unique skill sets to showcase best practices in teaching. The scenarios have been adapted from common frustrations expressed by online instructors who encounter challenges with fostering meaningful engagement, inappropriate student conduct, and their own lack of technical expertise.

Facilitator Instructions:
- Arrange the participants into groups and assign each group one problem solving scenario.
- Allow participants to discuss how they would handle the outlined situation in order to sustain the online community they have created. Have participants address Contextual Questions (below) in order to engage with the scenario more deeply.
- Take up the scenarios as a large group by having each group share strategies, ideas, and challenges/frustrations.
- Ask analytical questions that further discussion and innovation. For example:
  - Is there anyone who would have responded differently to the scenario?
  - Who here has dealt with a similar situation in their teaching practice?
  - What opportunities were there in that scenario to team-teach?

Scenarios:

1. While the beginning of your online course featured meaningful dialogue between students, you notice the postings are becoming increasingly generic. Furthermore, students are waiting until just before class begins to post their comments. You remind students that their participation/contributions are graded but their output does not change. Now that you have hit the halfway point of the course, how do you incentivize the students to return to their best form?

2. You feel confident that a strong sense of community is felt by most enrolled in your online course and that the group is beginning to feel more comfortable sharing and contributing. On one occasion a student shares personal information about themselves that is not directly related to the course outcomes or content (i.e. abuse survivor or similar). Knowing that students may not be prepared to deal with these kind of disclosures, how do you address these contributions while maintaining classroom community?

3. “Providing immediate feedback to my students is becoming overwhelming. Just because I teach an innovative online course does not mean my lifestyle is anything
beyond traditional and antiquated! How can I better adjust to being ‘mobile’ and ‘present’ for my students without becoming overwhelmed?”

Contextual Questions:

*How do your strategies shift if...*

- Students happen to be from the same institution or from disparate universities?
- You are responsible for teaching 15 students versus 200 students?
- You are team teaching a course? How do you coordinate with the other teachers?
- The course is blended versus completely online?
- The course delivery is synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous (outside of real-time)?
- The course has an assigned Teaching Assistant (TA)?
- Several students are not accessing the readings/learning artifacts through the course LMS?
APPENDIX E: Handout #4 “Workshop Evaluation Form”

Name: (optional) ___________________

### Evaluation Form

Check the appropriate box:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate the workshop for</th>
<th>1 Poor</th>
<th>2 Fair</th>
<th>3 Good</th>
<th>4 Very Good</th>
<th>5 Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall quality of the Workshop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall quality of the facilitator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of the workshop to you as an educator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Would you recommend this workshop to a colleague?

- [ ] Yes  
- [ ] Maybe  
- [ ] No

The amount of time devoted to each topic was:

- [ ] Too long  
- [ ] About right  
- [ ] Too short

Please indicate whether the level of the workshop was appropriate to your current teaching role(s):

- [ ] Too advanced  
- [ ] About right  
- [ ] Too basic

Do you think you will integrate the information gained in this workshop into your teaching?

- [ ] Yes  
- [ ] Maybe  
- [ ] No

If so, how?

Your suggestions for future workshops:
APPENDIX F: PLN Google Doc Sample Format:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>E-MAIL</th>
<th>ROLE</th>
<th>SUBJECT AREA</th>
<th>SOCIAL MEDIA CONTACT (i.e. Twitter handle)</th>
<th>EXPERIENCE LEVEL WITH ONLINE COURSES (min. 1, max. 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Jack Delville</td>
<td><a href="mailto:jdel@gmail.com">jdel@gmail.com</a></td>
<td>Associate Faculty at UBC</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Add me on LinkedIn and follow me on Twitter @profjdel</td>
<td>4 (comfortable but want to improve my practice)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX G: Suggested/Sample Ice Breaker Activity:

The suggested ice breaker activity is called “The Illustration of Learning and Feedback” (http://www.experiential-learning-games.com/feedbackgames.html). This game illustrates the importance of feedback as an important part of the communication cycle.

- Everyone chooses a partner (one is Partner A and one is Partner B), picks a spot in the room, and sits back-to-back in their chairs.
- The facilitator will provide Partner A with a sheet of paper with an image on it (comprised of basic geometric shapes/symbols) and Partner B with a blank sheet of paper and pencil.
- The objective of the activity is for Partner A to communicate the image to Partner B so they can draw it (without seeing it). During this round Partner B is not allowed to speak or ask for further direction.
- After completing the first image (often poorly), the partners will communicate what they need from each other in order to succeed in the drawing of the next image. During the second round Partner A is provided with a new image and this time Partner B is allowed to speak and ask for further instructions.
- A short debrief should follow surrounding the importance of feedback and communication.