Building Community In On-Line Courses

Mary F. Stuck, SUNY Oswego
Mary C. Ware, SUNY Cortland
SUNY TLT Conference
Dec. 7, 2005
Prior Experience

Ware

• student in “Developing curriculum for on-line delivery” at SUNY Oswego

• Teaching a hybrid course --Issues in Foundations of Education-- using modules developed in the above course

• Graduate work in Instructional Development – Syracuse University
Prior Experience

Stuck

• Teaching a grad/undergrad course in Sociology of Aging for SUNY Oswego (SLN course) for several years

• Developing a new course, “Sociology of Tourism” during the past year

• SLN training and extensive work with several MIDs
Collaborative Experiences

• Reviewing each other’s courses – syllabi, assessment instruments, assignments
• Sharing readings and references
• When Ware took the DL course in developing materials for on-line instruction she used Stuck’s teaching experience as a basis for many of her questions/issues (e.g., grading)
An Instructional Development “problem”

• Stuck has received the Chancellor’s award for excellence in teaching and other accolades, however her Sociology of Aging course was “dry, dull and boring’ in its first iteration.

• It was “technically OK” but it lacked something..and course evaluations showed it.
An ID “problem”, cont.

• When Ware was on sabbatical, she experienced DL for the first time. Her course was exceptional. Much of what made the course exceptional was the “community of scholars” who participated in that course.

• She kept wondering – how could Mary Stuck incorporate that into her course – what needed to be changed?
The concept of “community”

• Current research in distance learning stresses ‘teacher presence’, “social presence” and “cognitive presence” as necessary aspects of a community of inquiry. (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000)

• Ware experienced this sense of “community” and social presence in her DL course, evidenced by: students showing compassion for each other; the formation (at student request) of a “student help” area on the SLN site, so we could assist each other, etc.; encouragement of students to continue the course if they considered dropping out.
Figure 1: Community of Inquiry

(Reproduced by permission from Pergamon.
Enhancing Community of Inquiry

• Defining community
• What does “community” involve?
• What enhancements might provide for more “community” in a DL course?
What IS Community?

• McMillan and Chavis (1986) : “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)

Components of Community

• Spirit
• Trust
• Interaction
• Common Expectations -- that we are a “community of scholars”

• adapted from Rovai, A.P. “Building Sense of Community at a Distance” IRRODL April 2002)
How could Sociology of Aging be altered to add more “community”?

More teacher comments on student discussion

More introduction of “personal” information about the teacher

Community building assignments (“people bingo”)
Results

- Better course evaluations
- Better quality student work
- Students corresponding with the professor AFTER the course was over
Another Instructional Development “problem”

• EDU 671 – Issues in Foundations of Education tends to be ‘a required course in which few students are interested”
• Taken in the summer – there is little time and too much content
• Audience consists of practicing teachers who want practical information, not theory
Could a Hybrid course be a solution?

- Allows student work outside of class (more efficient use of time)
- Allows many different modalities of learning
- Allows everyone to be heard (discussion assignments)
EDU 671 - Web CT Module – History of Education

• Solutions included: several discussion rooms with provocative topics

• Assignment – a personal “time line” of his/her life…and then a time line of events related to some “underrepresented group’s” educational history

• Community resulted in several ways – better than face to face classroom
  – Everyone introduced him/herself to everyone else
  – Everyone had to respond to several posts
  – Everyone shared each other’s time lines
Changes in Student Response

- VERY POSITIVE to DL component
- Evidence: student evaluations
  informal student comments
  quality of student work
Things to “take away”

- Collaboration helps – in designing courses and in improving them
- ‘social presence’ and “community” can be lacking in DL courses unless specifically planned for
- Some useful references
Resources (just a beginning)


• Rovai, A. P. Building Sense of Community at a Distance. *IRRODL* April 2002 (http://www.irrodl.org/content/v3.1/rovai.html)