

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AS MEANS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH ONLINE COURSES

N.V.Ivankova

(Doctor of Philosophy, Associate Professor, University of Alabama at Birmingham)

Создание электронного виртуального сообщества среди студентов рассматривается как эффективный метод активизации учебного процесса при компьютерном дистанционном обучении. В статье обсуждается ряд эффективных приемов организации такого сообщества, цель которых обеспечить активное участие студентов в виртуальном классе.

Створення електронного віртуального суспільства серед студентів розглядається як ефективний метод активізації навчального процесу при комп'ютерному дистанційному навчанні. У статті обговорюється ряд ефективних методів організації такого суспільства, мета яких зробити можливим активну участь студентів у віртуальному класі.

Computer-mediated learning is reshaping higher education, allowing for creation of new learning environments, inclusion of more nontraditional students, and affording greater access to education via online courses and programs (1; 2, 28-32; 3; 4, 265-274). According to the recent Sloan-C Survey of Online Learning nearly 3.5 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2006, representing nearly 20% of all U.S. higher education students (5). This is a nearly 10% increase from the previous year. The growth rate for online enrollments is 9.7% and far exceeds the 1.5% growth of the overall higher education student population. Convenience, flexibility, and improved student access to learning are the most often cited objectives for online courses and programs (5; 6, 1-12; 7, 59-70).

In spite of growing popularity, computer-mediated instruction is criticized for having changed the fundamental nature of collegiality and community development among participant learners, which, reportedly, helps create cohesiveness and encourages students' persistence in an academic program (8; 9; 10, 89-97). The premise for such claim is that on-campus environment with its available advising and student support services, extracurricular activities and associated organizations, provides better opportunities for student successful matriculation.

Although virtual community is a comparatively recent phenomenon in education (11) it has been extensively researched. Hiltz (12) argued it was possible for people with shared interests to form and sustain relationships and communities through the use of computer-mediated communication, while Brown (13, 18-35) described the process of community building in online learning classes. It was also observed that online instruction had all the characteristics to support collaborative learning and cooperation between and among the participants (14, 12-34; 15; 16). Palloff and Pratt pointed out that online community is "the vehicle through which learning occurs online. Members depend on each other to achieve the learning outcomes for the course...Without the support and participation of a learning community, there is no online course" (17, 29). Research indicated that virtual communities positively affect student satisfaction, retention, and learning (18, 11-12; 16), promote increased information exchange, group commitment, and mutual support (19, 33-48), and encourage continued networking (13, 18-35). In their study of twenty-four doctoral students pursuing degrees in the computer-mediated environment, Ivankova and Stick (20) found that virtual community promoted engaged, interactive and collaborative learning and contributed to successful student matriculation.

Rheingold defined virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge...when enough people carry on public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (21, XX). In virtual environment, online courses serve as foundation blocks for community development and provide a context for establishing engaged and collaborative relationships among participating students. Students who form the membership of the virtual community are drawn together for a common purpose. Shared goals and values, cooperation and collaboration in achieving this purpose, and growing sense of camaraderie become the prerequisites for community development.

Brown (13, 18-35) identified three levels in the development of virtual community. The initial level is online acquaintance and making friends with participating students. This includes finding other students with similar backgrounds, interests and ideas. Prior to this, however, participants need to become familiar with and confident in technology. The second level includes conferment of community or its acceptance. At this stage students develop sense of personal satisfaction and an affiliation with the larger community as a result of extensive interactions and discussions within the course. The third level is developing camaraderie. This stage is achieved after long-term and intense associations with other students through personal communication when various affiliations with other participants are developed. This affiliation is associated with an online course, but may also be transferred to a larger virtual community beyond a course, thus creating a bond that lasts through a whole academic program (3).

Communication, collaboration, interaction, and participation are the cornerstones for creating a virtual community (22, 395-408). Computer-mediated environment provides numerous opportunities for communication in multiple modes to facilitate the learning process: one-on-one, one-to-many, synchronous in real time, and asynchronous in non-real time. Effective communication generates interaction and engagement with the course (23, 5-18) and needs to be encouraged and sustained by everybody involved. Collaboration is a necessary step to effective learning because it engages both students and instructors in the process. The goal is creating “a shared experience rather than an experience that is shared” (24, 185). Frequent interaction between course participants is essential because knowledge is socially constructed. In online environment written interaction is the major venue for information exchange and has both academic and social components. Finally, no virtual community is possible without active participation of all course participants. Involvement and presence of the instructor creates a learning environment that encourages student engagement and provides a foundation for community development. Additionally, monitoring and supporting student participation through clearly stated course guidelines and norms helps secure their requisite involvement and fosters the community.

The paper further describes how these four cornerstones, communication, collaboration, interaction, and participation, are implemented in creating a virtual community and engaging students in the graduate level introduction into qualitative research methods course delivered in the computer-mediated learning environment via the Blackboard platform through the University of Alabama at Birmingham. The course website contains a number of work areas that have their own academic purposes and are interactive. They include course syllabus and project guidelines, information about the Instructor and students, faculty office, reading materials and assignments, discussion board, team project work areas, virtual library, and virtual cafeteria (See Figure 1).

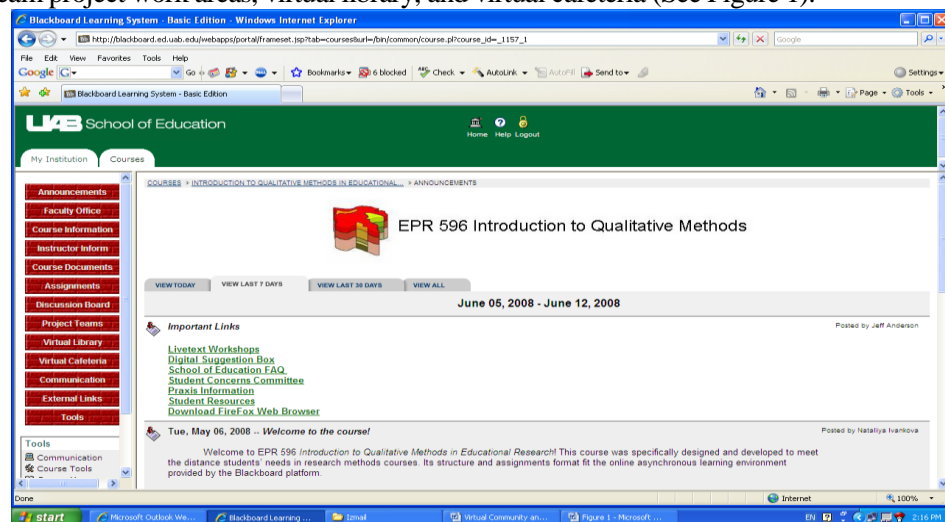


Figure 1

Communication in the course is achieved through multiple venues. The course requirements are explained in a detailed and comprehensive syllabus that contains information about the course objectives and sequence of the material, assignment and research project guidelines, manner of performance evaluation, and assessment rubrics. The level of detail and clarity is important considering that students are at a distance and might find some information ambiguous. Faculty Office is a place where students can post questions to the Instructor and secure responses, as well as get the course updates. Importantly, all course participants have access to the contents of Faculty Office and can benefit from these exchanges, thus negating the need for the Instructor to continuously explain an issue. Faculty Office also ensures the Instructor is accessible on a 24/7 basis. For personally related questions communication is conducted via phone and email.

Students collaborate over the course content using the discussion board. The course content is arranged into weekly topical modules devoted to various aspects of qualitative research and each contains a specific type and amount of material that must be completed within the specified time frame (See Figure 2).

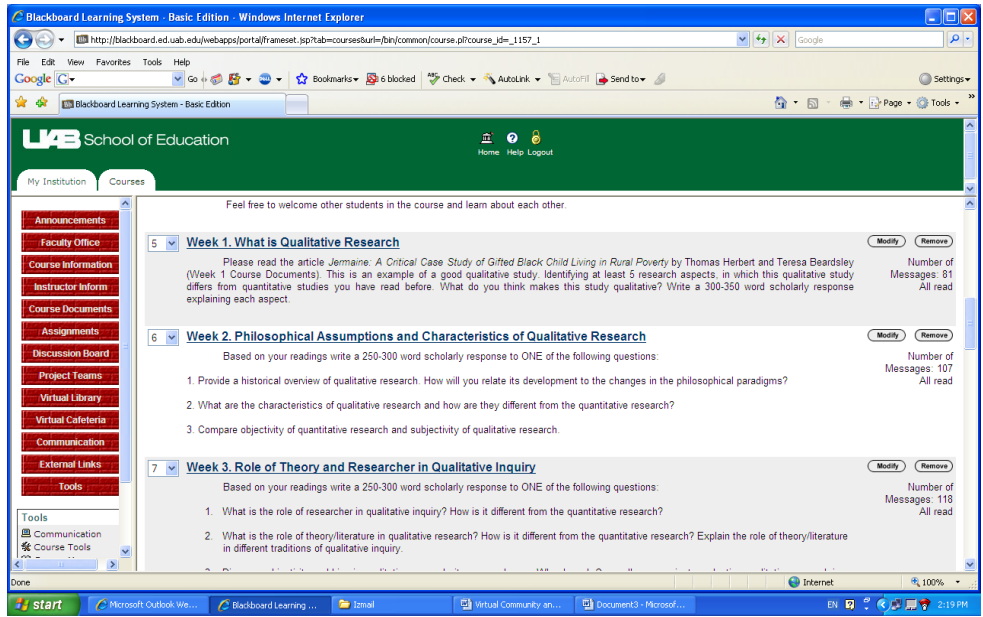


Figure 2

Students are required to post their weekly assignments and respond to a number of postings thus collaboratively contributing to each other’s learning. Due to research methods nature of the course, students apply the acquired knowledge by conducting qualitative mini-research group projects. This is another venue for collaboration. During the course, students work on their projects in teams in individual project work areas within the course and share different stages of their work with the class in the discussion board to gain constructive feedback from both the Instructor and other students (See Figure 3).

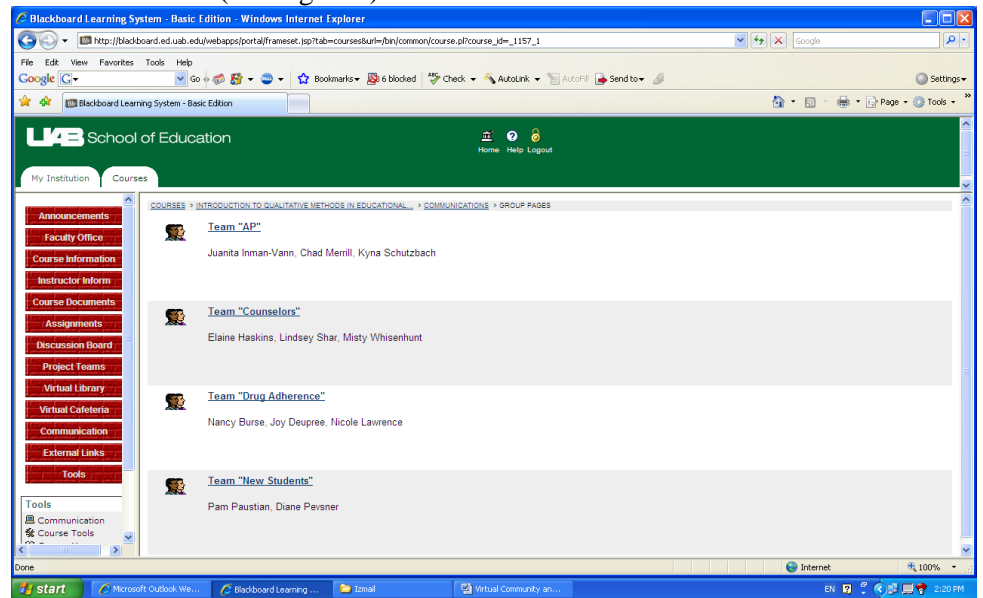


Figure 3

Discussion board and project team discussion areas are the main venues for course interactions due to its computer-mediated delivery mode. Discussion boards serve as a forum for students to validate their knowledge in a secure and supportive environment. There students address the module topics, interact with each other, and discuss the issues and/or points of view presented. Multiple threaded discussions occur concurrently during the progression of a topic module (See Figure 4).

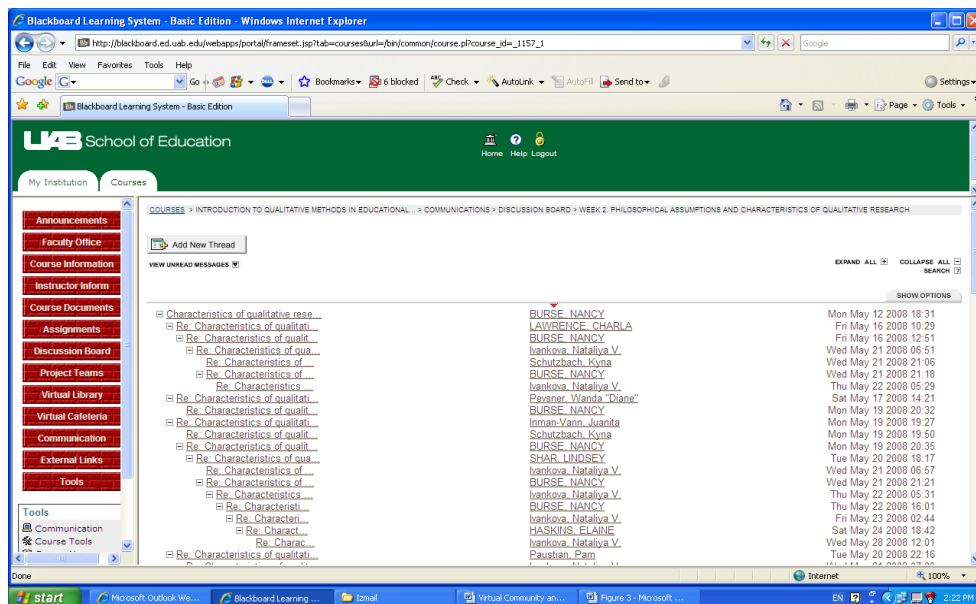


Figure 4

The course content evolves logically and follows the steps necessary to design and conduct a qualitative research study. Discussion boards, however, are reserved for academically related interactions. All other social interactions among the students are conducted through Virtual Cafeteria. The intent is to afford participants a venue for exchanging information that is not germane to the course but is essential for developing camaraderie and contributing to a virtual community.

To secure an effective learning environment, it is important for students to actively participate in the course. Guidelines for student participation are stated in the syllabus and are factored into the final course grade. For example, participation in weekly discussions accounts for 20% of the grade. Students are required to make the requisite number of postings into the assigned module and to respond to at least one-third of other students' postings. Type and content of responses as well as adherence to the established time windows is important so that each student maximally benefits from the contributions posted by classmates. Course participation and student engagement increases when the Instructor is actively "present" in the course, particularly during its first weeks. The Instructor should also closely monitor student participation by posting weekly reflections on the course progress and individually contacting inactive students.

In conclusion, both online course content and format are aimed at facilitating the creation of the community of learners, as effective as a traditional face-to-face classroom mode. More than that, virtual learning communities have proved even more effective in engaging students with the course due to their increased accountability, reliance on developed communication skills, and asynchronous discussion format allowing time to reflect.

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