

# When Teaching and Learning Leave the Classroom

In the last ten years, significant change has occurred in online learning. Once viewed as a less rigorous, softer, easier way to complete a course or degree, faculty now realize that the time involved in the development and delivery of a high-quality online course is substantial, and students are now realizing that completing courses and degree programs online is hard work. There is no longer a need to spend time defining what online distance learning is or is not; it is now commonplace in higher education and is gaining popularity in the K–12 arena as well. Ten years ago, we were trying to decide what constituted distance learning and asked questions such as, “If the class meets face-to-face two or three times during the term, is that a distance learning course?” Today we know that distance learning takes several forms, including fully online courses, hybrid or blended courses that contain some face-to-face contact time in combination with online delivery, and technology-enhanced courses, which meet predominantly face-to-face but incorporate elements of technology into the course. In addition, academic institutions are experimenting with time schedules

that depart from the traditional semester or quarter in order to more effectively deliver online classes.

It is not unusual now to see six-week intensive courses or courses with flexible start and end dates. If we examine all the ways in which distance learning is occurring now, it is possible to state that almost every course delivered via some form of technology is a distance learning course. There is one important element, however, that sets online distance learning apart from the traditional classroom setting: *Key to the learning process are the interactions among students themselves, the interactions between faculty and students, and the collaboration in learning that results from these interactions.* In other words, the formation of a learning community through which knowledge is imparted and meaning is co-created sets the stage for successful learning outcomes.

Ten years ago, the notion of building community online was seen as “fluff” or just one more thing an instructor might pay attention to in the delivery of an online course. However, much research has been conducted in recent years regarding the importance of community in an online course and in online teaching in general (Garrison, n.d.; Rovai, 2002; Rovai and Jordan, 2004; Shea, Swan, and Pickett, 2004; Wenger, 1999) and, further, into the concept of social presence, defined as the ability to portray oneself as a “real” person in the online environment (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Picciano, 2002; Richardson and Swan, 2003; Rovai and Barnum, 2003). The findings of these research studies and others have supported our notion that the key to successful online learning is the formation of an effective learning community as the vehicle through which learning occurs online. Adams and Sperling (2003) note that the community building process embedded in online courses has helped transform teaching and learning in higher education. Some of the changes they describe for students include greater availability and accessibility of information, engagement of different learning styles, and promotion of increased responsibility for teaching and learning. The changes faculty are experiencing include greater accessibility to and availability of information but also encompass the development of new skill sets for teaching and the need to rethink pedagogy, redefine learning objectives, reevaluate assessment, and redefine faculty work roles and culture.

We also see these changes in a number of college classrooms today, not just in online classrooms. And we continue to learn more about how people learn. Carol

Twigg (1994b) indicated that many students are concrete-active learners, that is, they learn best from concrete experiences that engage their senses. Their best learning experiences begin with practice and end with theory (Twigg, 1994b). Many instructors, seeking to improve their practice and the learning outcomes for their students, have incorporated active learning techniques such as working collaboratively on assignments, participating in small-group discussions and projects, reading and responding to case studies, role playing, and using simulations.

These practices transfer well into the online classroom. However, instructors need to be diligent and deliberate in ensuring their success. When learners cannot see or even talk to each other, the use of collaborative assignments becomes more challenging but far from impossible. (We offer suggestions for implementing collaborative learning techniques in the online classroom in Chapter Eight.)

Learning in the distance education environment cannot be passive. If students do not enter into the online classroom—do not post a contribution to the discussion—the instructor has almost no way of knowing whether they have been there. So students are not only responsible for logging on but they must also contribute to the learning process by posting their thoughts and ideas to the online discussion. Learning is an active process in which both the instructor and the learners must participate if it is to be successful. In the process, a *web of learning* is created. In other words, a network of interactions between the instructor and the other participants is formed, through which the process of knowledge acquisition is collaboratively created. (See Chapters Eight and Nine for a discussion of collaborative learning and the transformative nature of the learning process.)

Outcomes of this process, then, should not be measured by the number of facts memorized and the amount of subject matter regurgitated but by the depth of knowledge and the number of skills gained. Evidence of critical thinking and of knowledge acquired are the desired learning outcomes. Consequently, cheating on exams should not be a major concern in an effective online environment because knowledge is acquired collaboratively through the development of a learning community. (The assessment of student performance in this environment is discussed in Chapter Ten.)

Institutions entering the distance learning arena must be prepared to tackle these issues and to develop new approaches and new skills in order to create an empowering learning process, for the creation of empowered learners is yet another desired outcome of online distance education. Successful online teaching is

a process of taking our very best practices in the classroom and bringing them into a new, and, for some faculty, untried, arena. In this new arena, however, the practices may not look exactly the same.

Take, for example, a recent discussion with a professor in a small college where a distance delivery model was being implemented for a master's degree program. A software program was chosen and a consultant hired to install it on the college's server. There it sat for almost a year until the college decided to begin using it more extensively. Because of our expertise in faculty training and development for the delivery of distance education programs, we were consulted about the best way to improve a program that was not working very well. The professor informed us that the software had been used by a couple of instructors for a couple of courses. However, with further inquiry, we discovered that a course syllabus had never been posted online in any of these courses; nobody knew that an extensive faculty handbook for course development and delivery was embedded in the software. All they had been doing was using this potentially powerful software package as an e-mail system rather than for creating a distance learning environment. Was distance education and learning really happening here? No, of course not. So what does it take to make the transition from the classroom to the online arena successfully? What are the differences we face in this environment? And finally, what issues do we need to be concerned with? We answer the last question in the next section through a discussion of the issues and concerns related to online education. The answers to the other questions follow in subsequent chapters.

## **ONLINE ISSUES AND CONCERNS**

When instructors begin to use technology in education, they experience a whole new set of physical, emotional, and psychological issues along with the educational issues. Many of these issues relate to the development of social presence. As we struggle to define ourselves online, we may experience emotions and try out behaviors that have not been part of our repertoire. The new issues also include the physical problems that can be experienced as the technology is used extensively, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, back problems, headaches, and so forth. Psychologically, students and faculty can become addicted to the technology. In fact, there are now centers devoted to the study and treatment of Internet addiction. Students and faculty can begin to fantasize and experience personality shifts while online, and their minds can drift. They may have a difficult time setting reasonable bound-

aries and limits around the amount of time they spend online. We have not had to address these issues in the traditional classroom, but we must do so as we teach online because they affect the ways learners interact with each other and with course material. In the traditional classroom, if a student experiences mind drift it may not be noticeable to the instructor or to the other students in the class. The student may be physically present but psychologically absent. In the virtual classroom, however, if a student drifts away, that absence is noticeable and may have a profound impact on the group.

Online learning has brought a whole new set of issues and problems into academics; as a result, instructors and their institutions have had to become more flexible and learn to deal with these problems. Professors, just like their students, need the ability to deal with a virtual world in which, for the most part, they cannot see, hear, or touch the people with whom they are communicating. Participants are likely to adopt a new persona, shifting into areas of their personalities they may not have previously explored. For example, an instructor, like a student, who suffers from performance anxiety in the face-to-face classroom may be more comfortable online and more active in responding to students. A colleague of ours who has wanted to teach for several years and who feels that he has a contribution to make is very nervous about entering a classroom and facing a group of students. He has been offered several opportunities to teach because of the expertise he would bring to a learning situation, but he has resisted. When offered an opportunity to teach online, however, he accepted readily, acknowledging that the relative anonymity of the medium feels more comfortable for him. The idea of being able to facilitate a discussion from the comfort of his home office was very appealing to him, whereas doing the same thing face-to-face was intimidating. However, the opposite may also be true: an instructor who does well face-to-face may not be successful online. We were told the story of an accounting professor who was extremely personable in his face-to-face classes. To assist students in memorizing difficult concepts, he would compose songs and play them in class, accompanying himself on his guitar. He was approached to teach online but resisted strenuously because he did not feel he could adequately transfer his musical approach to accounting to the online environment, even with the use of attached audio files. His first attempt at online teaching was not well-received by students and he decided not to continue with online teaching. Just as all instructors are not successful in the classroom setting, not all will be successful online. It takes a unique individual with a unique set of talents to be successful in the traditional classroom; the same

is true for the online classroom. The ability to do both is a valuable asset in today's academic institutions.

## **STUDENTS ONLINE**

Some attributes make students successful online when they are not in the face-to-face classroom. For example, what about the introverted student? Will such a student, who does not participate in the face-to-face class, blossom in the virtual classroom? Research conducted by one of us indicates that an introverted person will probably become more successful online, given the absence of social pressures that exist in face-to-face situations. Conversely, extroverted people may have more difficulty establishing their presence in an online environment, something that is easier for them to do face-to-face (Pratt, 1996).

The Illinois Online Network (2006) describes the characteristics of successful students in distance education programs:

- Open-minded about sharing life, work, and educational experiences as part of the learning process
- Able to communicate through writing
- Self-motivated and self-disciplined
- Willing to “speak up” if problems arise
- Able and willing to commit four to fifteen hours per week per course
- Able to meet the minimum requirements for the program (that is, this is not an easier way to meet degree requirements)
- Accept critical thinking and decision making as part of the learning process
- Have access to a computer and a modem (and, we add, at least some minimal ability to use them)
- Able to think ideas through before responding
- Feel that high-quality learning can take place without going to a traditional classroom (para. 2)

Nipper (1989) described the successful learner in an online environment as a “noisy learner,” one who is active and creative in the learning process. This and

other, similar references led many to believe that distance education is best applied to and seen as most successful in the arena of adult education. However, more high schools, colleges, and universities are using this delivery method with all groups of students regardless of age or level of educational experience. Should we expect that all students will succeed in this environment? Although a student who is unsuccessful in the face-to-face classroom may do well online, it is unrealistic to expect that all students will do well. When a student does not perform well, as evidenced by lack of participation, he or she should be given the option of returning to the face-to-face classroom. This should not be considered a failure but simply a poor fit. Changing to another delivery medium is not usually an option in the face-to-face classroom; there may be no other alternatives. The online classroom provides an alternative that may be useful for some students.

In our experience, online distance education can successfully draw out a student who would not be considered a noisy learner in the traditional classroom. It can provide an educational experience that helps motivate students who appear to be unmotivated because they are quieter than their peers and less likely to enter into a classroom discussion. Take the example of an Asian student, Soomo, who participated in one of our online classes on the topic of management and organizational theory. He introduced himself to the group in the following way. We have not changed his writing; we wanted his struggles with language to be apparent.

And one of my problems, it's my responsibility, English is not my native language so I'm still struggling with learning English. I'll try hard but everyone's consideration will be appreciate regarding this matters in advance. I'm also see myself with introvert style. And feel uncomfortable to talk by on line.

By his own admission, he was generally a quiet member of face-to-face classes. Although he wanted to share, his struggles with English and the extroverted nature of his classmates left him silent, though actively listening to discussion. As our online course continued, his posts to the discussion were frequent and indicated a depth of thought. The following is his contribution to a discussion of *Reframing Organizations* by Bolman and Deal (2003):

My understanding for the human resources frame is that this frame focuses on the fit between individual and organization. In this point of

view, I can think about the “manager’s job and the organization theory.” The potentially disastrous consequences can be avoided, however, if the manager commands a sound knowledge of the organization theory. This theory can help him or her make quality decisions and successfully influence others to carry them out. It can help improve decision quality by making the manager aware of the various components of organization theory. To understand how they fit together as an explanation of the activity of the organization provides a perspective for seeing a decision’s consequences. . . . Better quality decisions coupled with more effective implementation through better understanding of individual and group behavior can bring improved performance to the organization. I think it’s important that a manager (management group) ensure that its members have exposure to organization theory.

Personally, I don’t like the word “Frame.” Because it means, in other words, “easy to break.” Some organizational changes are incremental. They entail incorporating new technologies with existing missions and strategies. Organizational growth and redirection may also be incremental, but not necessarily. Other organizational changes are frame breaking. The risks are high, and events happen quickly. This usually means a change in the organization’s goals and operations. Organizational start-ups and mergers are likely to be frame-breaking experiences.

Most of this student’s contributions to the discussion throughout the course were of this nature. He received feedback from other students regarding the thoughtfulness of his contributions and his ability to help them look at ideas in another way. Generally quiet and concerned about his language skills in a face-to-face classroom, this student was able to overcome all of this in the online environment and make significant contributions to his own learning as well as to that of his student colleagues.

## **MAKING THE TRANSITION AND ESTABLISHING PRESENCE**

The following is from a graduate student.

On Monday I had a mini-meltdown all on my own. I was really missing the body language cues and the time lag in the conversation was frus-

trating. I was very aware that I am working with a bunch of people who are obviously high functioning with lots of expertise. I wanted to be able to contribute at a comparable level and wondered if I was up to the task. I also wanted to respond quickly to all the links while juggling too many other responsibilities. I took a deep breath, looked at the humour in the situation and went to bed! *Cheryl*

This quotation, posted by a graduate student to an online course, is representative of some of the struggles that may occur as the transition is made from the face-to-face classroom to an online environment where interactions among learners are expected. When teaching and learning leave the classroom, many elements are left behind and new expectations emerge.

Picture a classroom on a college campus. As the time for class approaches, students begin to gather. They may arrive individually or in small groups. They begin to talk to each other, possibly about the class or about activities, friends, and life outside the classroom. When class ends, students gather again in the hallways, on the grounds of the campus, down the street at a coffee shop, or in the student union in order to make personal connections, create friendships, and simply socialize. In the online classroom, as it is configured currently, instructors and students are predominantly represented by text on a screen. We cannot see the facial expressions and body language that help us gauge responses to what is being discussed. Unless we are working in a synchronous virtual classroom situation, we cannot hear voices or tones of voice and thus may have difficulty conveying emotion. As Cheryl indicated in her post, it is difficult for some students to establish a sense of presence online. Instructors and their students become, in effect, disembodied. In a face-to-face situation, we are able to convey in a multitude of ways who we are as people. How does one do that online? How do we help the other participants get to know us; likewise, how do we get to know them so that we have a sense of the group with which we are communicating? How does an instructor teach in this environment? How do the participants in the online classroom become re-embodied? In Chapter Two, we explore the important concept of establishing presence in much more detail.

One way to help create presence, however, is through the use of *threaded discussion*—a series of posts displayed in outline form in the discussion area of the online course. Although many instructors use course management systems to

deliver course content, some are still confused by the use of threaded discussion. They are not sure about how to use it effectively and so simply avoid it. We discuss the importance of threaded discussion throughout this book and provide examples of its use as well. Exhibit 1.1 shows one of the ways in which people can connect online, illustrating how threaded discussion can be used to mediate the somewhat disembodied nature of online learning and the consequent need for techniques to personalize and humanize the course. The exhibit shows the instructor posting a series of discussion questions and students responding both to the questions and to one another (the students in the discussion are fictitious).

Although the graphical interfaces contained in current software packages devoted to online distance education are helping to create a more interesting and stimulating environment in which to work by allowing posting of photos, brief video introductions by the instructor, or creation of Web pages that present a profile for a student or instructor, they are still predominantly textual. Many who write about distance education have expressed concern as to how participants make more “human” connections while continuing the learning process.

Nipper (1989), a relatively early writer on online distance learning, discusses the need to create a sense of “synchronous presence” and reduce the social distance between all participants. Presence can be defined as the degree to which a person is perceived as “real” in the online environment. The concept of presence has triggered numerous research studies and has been correlated with increased learner satisfaction with online courses and a greater depth of learning (Picciano, 2002; Richardson and Swan, 2003; Rovai and Barnum, 2003). Rovai and Barnum (2003), as well other researchers, note that the interaction of the instructor with the learners together with the development of highly interactive course activities helps increase the perception of learning online. Picciano (2002) cautions, however, that interaction and presence are not one and the same: “Interaction may indicate presence but it is also possible for a student to interact by posting a message. . . . while not necessarily feeling that she or he is part of a group or a class” (p. 22). This caution is one that we, too, have presented to the faculty we have trained to teach online: simply getting students to talk to one another is not sufficient. Instead, there needs to be a focus on establishing human-to-human contact before the interaction involved with course content begins, a means by which presence can be established. Richardson and Swan (2003) found a correlation among presence, student learning, and satisfaction with online courses but have determined that

**Exhibit 1.1.**  
**Example of Threaded Discussion in an Online Course.**

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there is a paucity of research about presence online. They suggest that this is an area meriting more study and discussion. We present our own thoughts about the importance of social presence online and how it affects community building in Chapter Two.

Even though in most online distance learning courses students have the luxury of logging on to the course site whenever it is convenient for them (known as asynchronous communication), Nipper (1989) suggests that it is important to somehow create the sense that a group is working together in real time. Rarely will that group of people be online at the same time unless synchronous communication (also known as chat) is built into the course design. However, an attempt to form connection and community online through asynchronous threaded discussion

allows participants to feel, when they enter a discussion forum in a course site, that they have entered a lively, active conversation.

Nipper states that the need for social connection is a goal that almost supersedes the content-oriented goals for the course. Students should gather online, just as they do on the campus of a university. To accomplish this, they must establish a sense of presence online, thus allowing their personality to come through to others in the group. This sense of presence, along with the relative anonymity of the online medium, may create a sense of freedom, allowing otherwise unexplored parts of their personality to emerge. Such exploration can be fostered by encouraging students to post introductions along with their fears and expectations for the process or, when possible, to create a homepage that others in the group can visit. Some course management applications allow for the creation of a homepage, complete with graphics and links to other sites on the Internet that are favorites of the person who created the page. This is a wonderful way for students to let others in the group know who they are and how they might connect with each other.

As online communication deprives us of some of the physical cues of communication and allows for or even demands more self-generated cues that affect our behavior, it also adds dimensions that otherwise would not be present (Pratt, 1996). For example, the availability and number of personal interactions via computer is limited only by time and access, not by distance. We can create, cultivate, and maintain social relationships with anyone who has access to a computer. Connections are made through the sharing of ideas and thoughts. How people look or what their cultural, ethnic, or social background is generally becomes irrelevant in this medium, which has been referred to as the “great equalizer.” The increasing popularity of sites such as Friendster and My Space offers evidence of the search for social connection online. Although they are not online learning communities, these sites do provide social outlets for students outside of the online classroom.

The relationships formed online may, in fact, be more intense emotionally as the physical inhibitions created by face-to-face communications are removed. Social psychologist Kenneth Gergen (2000) believes that these interactions can continuously alter who we are: “One’s identity is continuously emergent, re-formed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships” (p. 139).

In the traditional face-to-face classroom, the quality and intensity of social relationships is simply not as much of an issue. The traditional model of pedagogy allows for the instructor as expert to impart knowledge to students, who are ex-

pected to absorb it. How students interact socially is not generally a concern. Many instructors have begun to realize that the traditional lecture model is not the model of choice for today's more active learners and have begun to adapt their teaching methods accordingly by including techniques such as small-group activities and simulations. Campuses are working to develop both residential and discipline-based learning communities because of the power they hold in facilitating a culture of lifelong learning (Fleming, 1997; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004). In the online classroom, it is the relationships and interactions among people through which knowledge is primarily generated. The learning community takes on new proportions in this environment and consequently must be nurtured and developed so as to be an effective vehicle for education.

## **THE SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE AND MEANING IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM**

Young children today are being weaned on interaction with various forms of media. Involved in everything from video games to the Internet, our youth are coming to expect more active ways of seeking knowledge and entertainment. Two studies, conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005) and the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin, 2005), note that approximately 87 percent of youth between the ages of twelve and seventeen are online and also using other forms of technology, such as cell phones and gaming technology. In addition, youth are engaging with social networking sites on the Internet, such as My Space and Friendster. Adults, including educators, however, are for the most part newcomers to this technological arena. As a result, something of a technological generation gap is emerging. Writers examining this gap note that the technological changes sweeping our culture have left education largely unchanged. A rift has opened between how education is viewed and delivered in the classroom and how we are beginning to obtain knowledge in our society. The Pew report notes, "Students report that there is a substantial disconnect between how they use the Internet for school and how they use the Internet during the school day and under teacher direction. For the most part, students' educational use of the Internet occurs outside of the school day, outside of the school building, outside the direction of their teachers" (Levin, Arafeh, Lenhart, and Rainie, 2002, para. 3). Parents report that their children rarely read books or

go to the library to complete assignments. Instead, Internet searching and use of sites such as Wikipedia are the means by which students complete homework and school assignments. Although the use of the Internet has grown among adults as well, adults often need additional training along with a shift in thinking and practice in order to successfully use the Internet for academic purposes. Consequently, a gap exists between our youth and those who are attempting to teach them—a gap that is not only forcing adults to become more technology-savvy but also to explore different theories and means by which to deliver education online to youth, whose expectations for learning have changed.

Recent theories in educational circles that attempt to bridge this gap, such as constructivism and active learning, posit that learners actively create knowledge and meaning through experimentation, exploration, and the manipulation and testing of ideas in reality. Interaction and feedback from others assist in determining the accuracy and application of ideas. Collaboration, shared goals, and teamwork are powerful forces in the learning process. Group activities, simulations, and the use of open-ended questions are but a few of the activities used to achieve these goals. Learners interact with knowledge, with the learning environment, and with other learners. The instructor acts mainly as a facilitator of the learning process. This is the essence of self-directed learning: it empowers learners—independent of the instructor—to follow those interactions wherever they may lead. Jonassen and others (1995) discuss the outcome of this form of teaching and learning. They note that the facilitation of learning environments that foster personal meaning making, as well as the social construction of knowledge and meaning through interactions with communities of learners, is preferred to instructor interventions that control the sequence and content of instruction. In other words, the educational process is learner-centered, with the learners taking the lead and determining the flow and direction of the process. Weimer (2002) notes that in order for this form of teaching and learning to occur, the balance of power between teacher and student needs to change. She comments that instructors have always held the power but that this power relationship needs to be reexamined. Instructors still retain the responsibility for teaching, but the decisions involved in learning really belong to students. By empowering students to take charge of their own learning process, learner-centered, constructivist teaching can emerge.

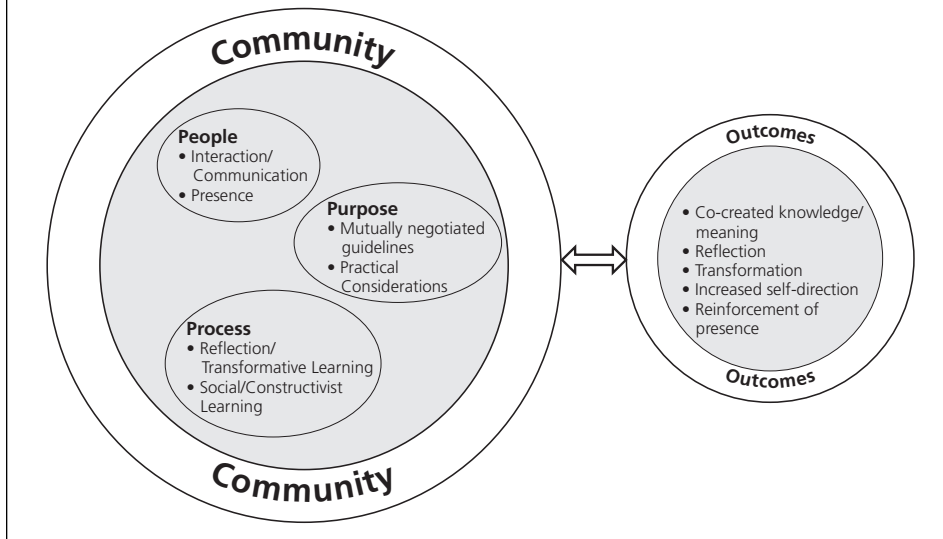
## PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

With community as a central feature in online courses, what other elements are needed to enable a learner-focused, active learning process? Unlike campus-based or residential learning communities that focus on curriculum as a unifying feature, allowing both students and faculty to come together in meaningful ways (Laufgraben, Shapiro, and Associates, 2004), the online learning community is the means by which the curriculum is delivered. Consequently, although the purpose for creating the community is the curriculum, there are other important elements that must be present in order for the community to form. Preece (2000), in describing online communities that are not focused on learning, notes that there are four basic features that must be present in order for community to form: *people*, *purpose*, *policies*, and *computer systems*. We believe, and Preece concurs, that this is not sufficient for the development of online *learning* communities, however. Two additional elements must be present in an online learning community: the collaborative learning and reflective practice that are necessary for transformative learning to occur (Palloff and Pratt, 2003). (We further discuss transformative learning in Chapter Nine.)

Our more recent thinking about the elements that must be present in order for online community to form have continued to evolve. We now organize them into three groupings—*people*, *purpose*, and *process*—and believe that the outcome of a well-constructed, community-oriented online course is *reflective/transformative learning*. Within the realm of community, however, are a number of elements. Exhibit 1.2 is a graphic representation of our model of online learning communities and their impact on learning.

Although we clearly need people in order to create a community, what is not so obvious is how people express who they are online. Thus, social presence becomes a critical element in community building. The instructor models the development of presence through his or her guidance and facilitation of the course, and empowers students to take on the continued job of community building and the exploration of content. Establishing guidelines as a starting point in the online course serves as a means by which the group defines shared goals and purpose. Other issues that affect the definition of purpose for the group include practical considerations such as time (including the time involved in working in an online course

**Exhibit 1.2.**  
**Elements of Community-Based Online Learning.**



and time management issues), the size of the group, and the ability to create a sense of safety and security. The process of online learning becomes a bit more complicated. Interaction and collaboration are critical to community development; without them, there would clearly be no community. The inclusion of collaborative activity and teamwork helps increase the level of communication and interaction in the class. Finally, the social constructivist context wherein the group works together to actively create knowledge and meaning becomes the vehicle through which learning occurs online and is a critical component of the process of online work. All of these elements work together to create the online community; none is any more or less important than the others.

Looking at the full picture of community-based online learning shows us that a more active learning model is the model of choice for this environment and will support the desired course outcomes. Given the limitations of access to the student population, as well as such elements as time and distance, the instructor has limited control over what is being learned and how. And because learners are left to some degree to their own devices, it is up to them to make sense of the body of knowledge associated with the course being delivered. The instructor supports this

process through the development of the course itself, use of collaborative assignments, facilitation of active discussion, and promotion of the development of critical thinking and research skills. The outcome is an environment rich in the potential for collaborative learning and the social construction of meaning, as well as transformative learning and reflective practice. As we proceed through the book, we explore each element of the model in depth; as such, the model becomes an organizing mechanism for our look at online community building.

## **NEW APPROACHES, NEW SKILLS**

What leads to successful outcomes in online classes? Is it the mode of teaching or facilitation? Is it the norms established or the guidelines for participation? Is it the level of education of the group? Is it the ability of the instructor to act as a facilitator during the process of delivering the course? All of these factors come together to create success in this medium. When teaching and learning leave the classroom, it is up to the instructor to create an effective container within which the course proceeds by posting goals, objectives, and expected outcomes for the course, initial guidelines for participation, thoughts and questions to kick off discussion, and assignments to be completed collaboratively. Then it is time to take a back seat of sorts and gently guide the learners in their process by monitoring the discussion and entering it to prod participants to look at the material in another way or to gently steer the conversation back on course if it should stray. This is not a responsibility to be taken lightly and requires daily contact and presence with the learners online. Often the instructor finds that he or she must be present and active more in the beginning of the course and then can gradually pull back as the learners take the lead. Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, and Tinker (2000) note that good facilitation on the part of the instructor becomes apparent when the learners, on their own and with one another, begin to use the types of interventions the instructor might use: “If you’ve done a good job of laying the support framework for pragmatic dialogue, the participants begin . . . to facilitate their own dialogue” (p. 203). Along the way and especially at the end of the course, then, the instructor incorporates peer feedback on assignments into the evaluation of student progress, which can later be figured into a grade.

What we are suggesting is a different way in which to deliver a course. In our observation, many online courses still are typically content- and faculty- or facilitator-driven, just as they are in the face-to-face classroom. In many ways they

perpetuate an old model of teaching and learning, wherein participants produce pieces of work that are to be assessed and commented on by an expert. There is discussion and feedback, but it relates to the work that has been presented by the expert. The framework we offer in this book, by contrast, is more free-flowing and interactive. Participants generate a bibliography of readings beyond the assigned text through their own research and interaction with their peers; they negotiate guidelines for participation based on direction from the instructor; the instructor creates a structure that allows students to venture into areas previously unexplored. The work that students create in the process may be shared online and peer feedback on the work encouraged. This is truly an empowering, mutual learning experience, akin to the synergy that can occur in the classroom when an instructor energizes students by allowing them to fully immerse themselves in content and follow the resulting paths of inquiry wherever they might lead. The following sections show what a framework for successful online teaching should contain.

### **Access to Technology and the Knowledge to Use It**

In order to successfully conduct classes online, make sure that participants have access to and familiarity with the technology to be used. Comfort with the technology (both hardware and software) contributes to a sense of psychological well-being and thus a greater likelihood of participation. It is also important to pay attention to the learning curve involved in the use of the technology by participants, as well as faculty or facilitators. This should be incorporated into the learning process. (We explore this more fully in Chapter Five.)

### **Guidelines and Procedures**

A set of guidelines should be generated by the instructor as a first item of discussion in an online course. The guidelines and procedures should be loose enough to allow for some debate and discussion, open to some degree of negotiation (that is, how a student receives a grade is not negotiable, but due dates might be negotiable), and generated partly by the participants, particularly as they apply to how students will interact with one another; in other words, students should be encouraged to develop a common set of ground rules for interaction. Imposed guidelines that are too rigid will constrain discussion, causing participants to worry about the nature of their posts rather than to simply post freely. In larger classes, small discussion groups or work teams can be created wherein guidelines can be

discussed and negotiated. Good, respectful “netiquette,” however, should be encouraged regardless. (In Chapter Seven, we provide suggestions and examples for the development of this type of class, including some sample syllabi that have been successfully used online.)

## **Participation**

Buy-in from the participants is essential. Participants must first agree to minimum participation standards and understand what they are committing to. Minimum levels of participation should be established and agreed upon in order to create a high level of discussion. In some cases, an initial face-to-face session can be held that will establish a sense of being part of a group and thus serve to support participation. When this is not possible, and it often is not, initial online contact must include attempts at group development before moving into content. We like to refer to this as Week Zero, or the important community-building week that precedes the actual start of the course. For example, the instructor may ask that all participants post an introduction. This may be followed by the instructor posing open-ended questions, possibly around the establishment of guidelines or that relate to the students’ previous experiences with the content to be studied. Continued attention to these issues must be included throughout the course. (We continue our discussion of these issues in Chapter Two and throughout the book.)

## **Collaborative Learning**

In order to be successful, classes conducted in an online environment must create an equal playing field. In other words, there must be equality of participant-facilitator and participant-participant interactions. The most powerful experiences are those in which interaction occurs throughout the group instead of between one participant and the facilitator within a group setting. The best facilitation is through modeling the methodology, that is, by acting as a group member who is contributing to the learning process. (We discuss these issues further in Chapter Eight.)

## **Transformative Learning, or Learning About Learning, Technology, and Oneself**

A critical outcome of online learning is the learning that occurs through the use of the online medium itself. Participants must be given the opportunity and space within the context of the class to explore how this learning environment is

different for them. They need to discuss the fears and insecurities, as well as the successes and surprises, associated with the online medium. Transformative learning moves a student from someone who takes in information to a reflective practitioner involved with the creation of knowledge. (We discuss this issue extensively in Chapter Nine.)

### **Evaluation of the Process and Student Assessment**

Finally, it is important to encourage participants to provide feedback to each other on an ongoing basis as well as to the instructor about their experience in the course. Given the nature of the online environment, it is also important to pay particular attention to the issue of student assessment. How will student performance be assessed? How do we evaluate the success of the course or lack thereof? Is the online program meeting the needs of the participants? Because we are promoting the use of a collaborative environment in the teaching process, collaboration must also be incorporated into the process of assessment and evaluation. And because we are attempting to create empowered learners as a desired outcome, self-evaluation is also an important component. (We return to this important issue in Chapter Ten.)

### **IMPLICATIONS**

The keys to the creation of a learning community and successful facilitation online are simple: *honesty, responsiveness, relevance, respect, openness, and empowerment*. When faculty create a virtual environment for participants in which these elements are present, group members can feel safe in expressing themselves without fear of how they will be perceived, allowing for active, rich discussion. The implications are that as educators and facilitators we must be able to create an atmosphere of safety and community in all of our learning settings, whether they are electronic or face-to-face. Students or participants must be able to speak and debate their ideas without fear of retribution from any source and should be encouraged to explore and research topics that may not be an explicit part of the curriculum or agenda. Instructors and facilitators should act as “playground monitors” or gentle guides while participants “play in the sandbox,” developing the norms and rules as they go. Facilitators and participants must become equal partners in

the development of an online learning community, as it is the participants who are the experts when it comes to their own learning.

If we can facilitate this occurrence in the online environment, we will be well ahead of what has traditionally occurred in the face-to-face or virtual classroom. Ideally, this will encourage us to engage in best practices in both environments. In fact, many instructors comment that their face-to-face teaching, as well as that of their colleagues, has improved and become more innovative, active, and creative as the result of teaching online.

Finally, many current models of distance learning maintain a traditional student-teacher relationship in interaction with a set curriculum. Our experience of online facilitation shows us how much further we are capable of traveling into the unknowns to explore new worlds of online learning. The development of community as a part of the learning process helps create a learning experience that is empowering and rich. It is essential to impart the importance of this process to faculty in order to maximize the use of the online medium in education. Without it, we are simply recreating our tried and true educational model and calling it “innovative,” without fully exploring the potential the online medium holds. We now move on to a more thorough discussion of what we mean by community online and the importance of social presence in that online community.

