by Diane Curtis

Building Online Learning Communities

A worldwide audience may be the motivation students need to succeed

Ask three teachers what constitutes an online learning community, and you're likely to get three different examples. One teacher might point to a brainstorming e-mail exchange between two students. Another may recall a weeklong project that culminated in a 10-person podcast. A third will mention a global warming blog. There are common features that link these examples, such as student collaboration, an audience beyond the teacher, lack of dependence on time and space, and feedback. But just like the technology behind it, the definition of an online learning community is in flux. However, pioneering educators, like those we're about to hear from, help refine the meaning as they create new online communities.

Today's technology, tomorrow's workforce

David Warlick, a well-known education author, speaker and consultant, says there are two types of online learning communities: personal learning networks, such as blogs and podcasts; or the more structured distance learning and online learning courses that use tools like Blackboard and Moodle e-learning systems. However, Warlick says both types of online learning communities have a common theme: "Learning is taking place through conversation and not delivery."

Warlick believes the kind of learning that comes with the Internet, podcasts and blogs, makes sense in an era when students will likely have 10 or more jobs during their working lives and will need to know how to teach themselves new skills and concepts. They won't be learning those skills and concepts by sitting in a classroom; they'll be learning them through conversations and connecting digitally with others through blogs and podcasts, or whatever tools become the technological favorites of their particular eras.

New generations will also need to know how to sift through an ever-expanding amount of information and distinguish between what is true or false, and useful or not. As Warlick explains, "Industrial-age literacy was reading the piece of paper in front of you. That information today is on a computer screen. But it's not enough to read it. You have to have the skills to organize that information."

Encouraging self-directed learning

Bob Sprankle, a teacher for 10 years, was named a 2005 Edublog Award winner and one of two Technology Educators of the Year for 2005–2006 by the Association of Computer Technology Educators of Maine. He religiously scours the Internet for new ideas on how he can use technology to create his ideal learning setting – one where the learning is directed mostly by the children themselves. He shares his findings with other teachers in his blog, Bit by Bit.

During Sprankle's early teaching years, he used computers to e-mail parents or showcase student work on a website. Over time, he introduced e-Pals and a classroom chat room. Now his students make podcasts about the books they read, the field trips they take and the presentations they make to teachers and administrators. They also create blogs of poems, art, essays and weekly journals.

They're inviting the whole world to view, listen and comment – and their efforts aren't going unnoticed.

"I love your first vodcast on podcasts," Paula Thomas from Brisbane, Australia, wrote about a video podcast the students made. "It's a brilliant idea."

Online learning communities can help students learn how to sort through an ever-expanding amount if information to determine what is useful and accurate.

"We listened into your podcast as college seniors, and we are impressed," wrote communications students from Fitchburg, Massachusetts. "Great work and great stuff by everyone."

This kind of feedback is getting students excited about learning.

"Podcasting is the funnest part of the day," says Emily B., one of Sprankle's students "We're reading to the world and it helps us express ourselves. It's really helped us step up in our learning."

Sprankle says now he can step to the side and free the students to direct their own learning. He may ask students to read a particular sentence or paragraph again to prod them to think critically about something they wrote, but often classmates will already have picked up on weaknesses

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in their peers' work and, through e-mails or blogs, discussed how to improve it. It's a quick, efficient way of getting feedback from many students. "They're very supportive, real gentle," Sprankle says about the peer critics.

Worldwide exposure motivates students

Warlick says when students know they have an audience, they're going to put in more effort. Research shows students think problems through more carefully, polish more richly and are more careful about punctuation and spelling. When students write a paper, hand it to the teacher and then get it handed back to them, they call it "playing school," Warlick says. "When they're writing a blog, they're communicating."

Sprankle agrees, calling his students' work "product with a purpose." He says the difference between producing something that their parents may or may not tack on the refrigerator versus producing something that can be accessed around the globe is very motivating. "They've just become so empowered," Sprankle says. "It constantly blows me away."

Gordon Brune, a fifth-grade teacher at Mamaroneck Avenue School in Mamaroneck, New York, who uses blogs to showcase student work, feels the same way. "My students no longer see themselves writing for a teacher or a bulletin board but for a real audience. Many times, my students have excitedly and incredulously stated things like, 'Man, people all the way from China are reading my stuff!' Some students' writing has become stronger," he says.

Beyond blogging

Lynne Sueoka has another version of an online learning community. Sueoka is a staff developer at Honolulu's Moanalua High School and a teacher in the school's MeneMAC program – a school-within-a-school program focused on integrating subjects and illustrating yearly themes through a variety of media, including video, audio and Web production.

Staff working on the MeneMAC program decided to add an online component to deepen the sense of community and nurture supportive relationships among the students, teachers and parents. The primary computer tools Sueoka and her colleagues use to create that sense of community are a website that houses the students' digital portfolios, e-mail, listservs and Web videoconferencing software.

Sueoka uses different tools than Sprankle and Brune in her online learning community, but her philosophy and goals are similar – create students capable of initiating and directing their own learning, and share knowledge in a way that enriches and deepens what they learn.

Sueoka says e-mail, for example, allows students to write precisely and get their message across while maintaining their own voices. With an online conversation, unlike a classroom conversation, the students have a chance to edit themselves, to find just the right words for what they're trying to convey, while maintaining a conversational style. Listservs give them room to expand the group of people who can give them feedback, offer suggestions or just provide moral support.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB SPRANKLE

Bob Sprankle says adding podcasts and blogs to his curriculum has helped him create an environment where students direct their own learning.

MeneMac teachers also created a space on the website for parents to comment on student portfolios and did four collaborative Web videoconferencing projects with a sister school in Molokai, Hawaii, and a class of students who speak English as a second language at a Japanese university.

Sueoka knows there is faster, better, cheaper technology out there – and there always will be. "But," she explains, "we set up a whole infrastructure and it works well for us." That doesn't mean she isn't trying new things. She and her principal, Darrell Galera, are studying podcasting and starting to use Blackboard's online discussion forum feature.

Start Your Online Learning Community Now

There are a host of online resources for educators interested in starting – or enhancing – an online learning community.

MeneMac
View the portfolios of students in the MeneMac program at Moanalua High School at www.mohs.k12.hi.us/media-central/index2.html.

Bob Sprankle's Room 208
Maine teacher Bob Sprankle showcases his student's podcasts and blogs and also offers a blog with tips for teachers at www.bobsprankle.com.

edublogs.org
http://edublogs.org provides free, fully functional blogs hosted on their dedicated server. Edublogs is the brainchild of James Farmer, a Melbourne-based education designer and social software consultant who also has a personal blog at http://incsub.org/blog.

Weblogg-ed
Will Richardson, author, speaker and supervisor of instructional technology at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in New Jersey, publishes a website and blog at www.weblogg-ed.com. He shares his thinking about using blogs and provides information and discussions on wikis, RSS, audiocasts and other technology products for K–12 educators.

Gordon Brune
View the class blogs of New York teacher Gordon Brune at http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger_id=251.

Tips from the experts

If teachers or administrators are interested in joining the online learning revolution, Sprankle recommends they start with a blog because it's so easy. "You can set up a blog in a matter of minutes – seconds, even," he says. "From there, the networking starts. If you build it, they will come." And once a teacher connects with even one teacher-oriented blog, "you'll find everybody else."

Brune likes the fact that blog programs, especially those from advocates who are educators as well, like David Warlick and James Farmer, are easier to master than webpage software. "The technology behind [blogs] isn't hard," he says. "If you've ever shopped and filled out a form [online], that's essentially it." Before he started using blogs, he was using FrontPage Web design software, but was looking for something that would be easier to explain to other teachers. He found what he wanted in the blog programs of Warlick and Farmer.

When teachers at Moanalua want to get their feet wet in an online learning community, Sueoka suggests they start with a forum on Blackboard, which is secure. A social studies teacher did just that last year when he decided a current events online forum would be more dynamic and interesting than just cutting out newspaper articles and bringing them to class for discussion. The in-class blog was a success, and now the teacher is studying other forms of online communication for his class.

Galera is always open to teachers' ideas that incorporate technology into the curriculum, but both he and Sueoka emphasize that content always comes first. And Galera's main advice about creating an online learning community is that "teachers first need to build a learning community within their classrooms." In high school, especially, students in one class may not even know each other. Galera encourages his teachers to use the kinds of strategies that are more often used in the elementary grades – Moanalua groups students into tribes – to establish a sense of camaraderie and cohesion among students. Then, says Galera, the class may be ready to move to an online environment "with the skills to communicate effectively and naturally."

Sprankle, Brune, Sueoka and Galera are just a few of the teachers and administrators across the country who have successfully built online learning communities. All agree that the effort has been worthwhile in terms of student engagement and a deeper learning that incorporates more critical thinking. But they also realize that commitment to online learning requires flexibility and the recognition that the only thing certain in an online learning community is change.

In Warlick's words, "It's an amazing time. It's kind of like the World Wide Web is being reinvented." And educators like those mentioned above are laying the groundwork.