

E-COMMUNITIES IN DISTANCE LEARNING

by Lisa George

When thinking of a distance learner, the image of a single, lonely student, sitting in the glow of a computer monitor typing away comes to mind. In reality, this student could easily be communicating with fellow students through an online or virtual community (or e-community).

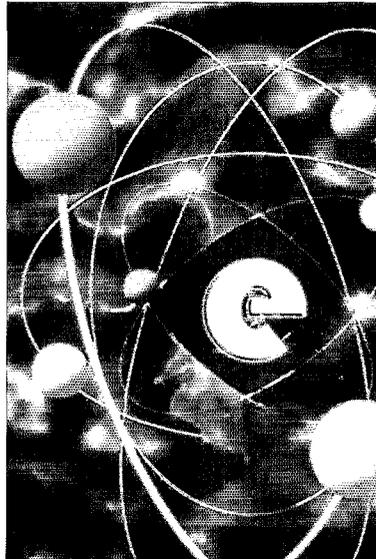
There are continuum categories of distance learning, synchronous and asynchronous, and each has its own types of e-communities. Most people are aware of e-mail and instant messaging, but there are additional types of e-communities that are important to a student learning at a distance. Based on the type of learning that is taking place, communities such as list-servs, video conferencing (VC), instructional television (ITV), and course management systems such as WebCT, Blackboard, or WebTycho, which is used at the University of Maryland, are used to form communities of learners who can discuss, collaborate, make decisions and effectively learn online.

The purpose of this paper is to define what is meant by the term distance learning e-community, discuss how e-communities are formed, describe some synchronous and asynchronous e-communities, and will provide a comparison of the two. The summation of the paper will be a presentation of the author's preferred type of electronic community, and the basis for that decision.

What is an e-community?

E-communities, or virtual or online communities, differ from traditional communities because they have no physical form. An e-community cannot

be seen, but does exist as social relationships in electronic form that occur when members of the e-community communicate through a common place on the Internet. For the most part, members of an e-community choose to be there. In distance learning



environments, e-communities are forced due to the type of learning that is taking place, and class members have to join in order to participate in the course. These e-community members still choose to be in there because of their registration in the course.

E-communities can be represented by synchronous e-communities, asynchronous e-communities, or a combination of both. All forms of e-communities encourage communication and the building of relationships between the members. Most e-communities have a leader and they all share the same goals or interests. In a course management system, instructors encourage students to form e-communities so the students can share

knowledge, collaborate on projects and learn to work together in groups. Student satisfaction in the course, retention of the coursework and overall learning are dependent on e-communities. (Brown, 2001)

A good example of an asynchronous e-community is the distance education program at the University of Maryland University College. Each course is designed to be an independent e-community. The leader of these e-communities is the professor of the course, the common interest is the subject of the course, and the common goal is learning. The measure of success is the final grade in the course.

How e-communities are formed

Students seek other students with whom they have a common or shared interest. (Palloff, 1999) As students come together from all over the world sharing common interests, an e-community is formed. E-communities are not place-dependent; they are communities with no physical boundaries. It is not necessary to have real-time interaction in order to have a cohesive e-community. E-communities can also be anonymous and have the advantage of not transmitting personal appearances that may contribute to a stigmatized opinion on the part of other community members. This produces a safer environment for the members and allows them to interact uninhibitedly. Students in an e-community, whether synchronous or asynchronous, are motivated to remain a part of the e-community by frequent and timely participation and respect for other

members. Students are more likely to find time to participate in the e-community when they develop a learning relationship with other members. (Brown, 2001)

When establishing an e-community, there are technical issues to consider. What type of connection will the community members have? These can be cable connections, satellite links, or telephone service via modem, all with differing bandwidths. The higher the bandwidth (such as in a cable connection versus a phone connection) the faster the connection. Will the members be connecting from a home computer system? If so, they may not have state-of-the-art computers, will probably have slow modem connections and will not have immediate technical support. Are the e-community members going to be in the same time zone? If not, then an asynchronous e-community will probably best suit the needs of the members.

Synchronous e-communities

Text-based e-communities

Synchronous e-communities include communication that takes place at the same time but from different locations. If members are globally dispersed, it becomes difficult to coordinate a time when all of the community members can be present together. (Palloff, 1999) Instant messaging is a form of communication where members of a defined e-community can chat in real time. These e-communities are defined by lists of contacts created by the member of the e-community. Once the list is complete and the e-community is formed, the member can select a contact on the list with whom to hold a chat. Chats can be one to one, or can include several members. Synchronous chats with more than five participants become very difficult to manage and follow.

One disadvantage to synchronous e-learning text-based communities during discussions is the typing speed of the members. The member who can type the fastest will contribute the most to

the conversation. (Palloff, 1999)

Audio & Video e-communities

One of the oldest forms of electronic distance learning is that of Instructional Television (ITV). ITV uses a television system to transmit one-way video and two-way audio to remote sites or locations. (Kurtz, 2001) The students at each remote site can form site-based e-communities for collaboration, discussion and decision making. These e-communities are close knit, tending to have one leader who coordinates the activities and represents the site when the entire class comes together. ITV session leaders encourage the formation of e-communities at the remote sites as well as collaboration and decision making among the students.

Asynchronous e-communities

The types of software that support an asynchronous e-community include e-mail, list-serv and course management systems. Asynchronous e-communities allow members to log on at any time and from any place. Postings are read at the time of the log-on, not at the time they are written. A posted message can be sent to a large number of people at one time, instead of an e-mail conversation that is one-to-one. In a course management system e-community, members can log on and read the threaded conversation, reflect on the posts they have read and respond at their convenience. (Palloff, 1999)

Asynchronous e-communities provide experiences to students not found in synchronous e-communities or real life. In an asynchronous e-community, it is often not possible to feel in touch with community members. It is also not possible to detect emotions or body language. Emoticons, such as smiley faces to represent a happy mood, are used to overcome this barrier. Threaded discussions are commonly used as a means of communication, especially in distance learning environments. Threaded discussions (referred to as "thread" for one topic or "threads" for

multiple topics) occur when the students of a course respond to questions posed by the instructor or other students, and it is obvious which comments were made in response to which other comments. Threaded discussion provides a means of associating a comment as a response to a previous comment. Often members feel lost during threads. There may be many pages of text associated with a single thread and it can be difficult to wade through all of the messages in order to understand the topic being discussed. Also, if asynchronous e-community members think about the thread offline, when they return to the e-community, they may feel that it is too late to become involved. (White, 2001)

Electronic Mail

Electronic mail (e-mail) is the exchange of messages that are stored on the computer using telecommunication features of the Internet. Text, graphic images and sound files can all be sent via e-mail. One of the first uses of the Internet was communication between Internet members, and this was accomplished by way of e-mail. An e-mail message can be sent to an individual recipient or to a list of recipients, and is held in the recipient's computer until she opens the e-mail and reads it.

E-mail is a popular asynchronous means of staying in touch and communicating with others. Disadvantages of e-mail include the fact that there is no order to the messages, e-mail addresses are susceptible to spam mail unless filters are used, and there can be quite a few messages received in a short time. (Boettchner, 1999) A major advantage to e-mail e-communities is that they can include anyone who has an address on the Internet.

Course Management Systems

The backbone of course management systems in a distance learning environment is the establishment of conference areas wherein threaded discussions occur. The instructor usually starts the discussion with a question

written or posted to the conference area, and the students respond to the question, and to each other, thus creating the threaded discussion. Threaded discussions help the student feel they are a part of an e-community and gives them confidence in their learning and ability to communicate with other students. (Brown, 2001) The first conference area established in a distance learning course is commonly referred to as "the Café." In this area, students can introduce themselves to other members of the e-community and discuss issues not related to coursework. Students get to know each other and can develop relationships that make the asynchronous e-community come alive.

A comparison of the synchronous and asynchronous e-communities

In distance learning, e-communities are beneficial to the students' learning process. However, each type of community, synchronous and asynchronous, has pros and cons. Synchronous communities allow students to meet in real-time. Asynchronous communities afford the students the opportunity to reflect upon their responses before submitting them to the community. In a synchronous community, the students are in communication with each other using text-based systems, typing as fast as they can to keep up with the thread of the conversation while asynchronous community members can absorb the postings of other members before responding. Both types of e-communities can be global in scope, but synchronous e-communities are restricted by time zones. Also, in both types of communities, there can be technical difficulties such as speed of connection, compatibility between operating systems, poor telephone or cable services, and interruptions.

Individual Preference

As a student learning at a distance, I have had opportunity to experience both

synchronous and asynchronous e-communities. The program at the University of Maryland University College is primarily asynchronous but the instructors encourage individual communication among the students, often achieved by way of synchronous chat. While I enjoy the threaded discussions and find it very easy to learn in an asynchronous environment, it has

“- the primary interest, goal, and objective of the e-community is learning.”

been my experience that the advantages of a synchronous environment are more willing to collaborate on work, review and comment on the work of others, and discuss topics and assignments outside of the formal class structure. Chats can include one-to-one meetings, or several students at one time in group discussions. A positive experience was an assignment where I was able to collaborate with two students in Canada – one in British Columbia and the other in Halifax. We had to adjust our chat times because of the time zone differences but we were able to discuss our assignment in depth, make decisions, and edit the work as a group in real time. This was more enjoyable than typing back and forth to each other in an asynchronous environment and was efficient in accomplishing our task.

It doesn't matter if the community is synchronous or asynchronous. All distance education e-communities have one thing in common – the primary interest, goal, and objective of the e-

community is learning.

References

Boettchner, Sue. (1999). *What types of virtual communities can I build and what tools are available?* Retrieved from the World Wide Web at <http://fullcirc.com/community/communitypes.htm>.

Brown, Ruth. (2001). "The Process of Community-Building in Distant Learning Classes." *JALN* Volume 5, Issue 2.

Hiltz, Starr R. (1998). *Collaborative learning in asynchronous learning networks: Building learning communities*. WEB 98. Orlando, FL. Retrieved 1/30/02 from the World Wide Web at http://eies.njit.edu/~hiltz/collaborative_earning_in_async.htm.

Kurtz, Gila. University of Maryland University College Course OMDE 631 9040 – Advanced Technology in Distance Education systems, Fall 2001.

Paloff, Rena M., Pratt, Keith. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace*. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass.

Rose, Raymond. *E-learning communities and cultures*. Retrieved 1/30/02 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.pt3.org/vq/rose.html>.

White, Nancy. (2001). *Staying "In the Moment"* in asynchronous online interaction. Retrieved 2/5/02 from the World Wide Web at <http://fullcirc.com/community/inthemoment.htm>.

Lisa George works in a small place at the edge of the universe, and is currently enrolled in the Masters of Distance Education Program at University of Maryland University College in Adelphi, Maryland.

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of yellow and orange rectangular segments. A small red diamond is at the top of the bar.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: E-communities in distance learning
SOURCE: Library Mosaics 13 no4 JI/Ag 2002
WN: 0218201871005

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:
<http://www.librarymosaics.com/>.

Copyright 1982-2002 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.